

# WALKING IN LOVE

By Lisa McNair

LIFE,  
LOSS,  
AND  
LOVING  
BECAUSE  
JESUS  
SAID SO.



Denise McNair at home, age 11.

My oldest memory is that my sister Denise was killed in the bombing of our church by mean White people for no other reason than she was Black. As you can imagine, that was quite a heavy burden to carry as a little child. Not only was I hated by a whole group of people, but that kind of hate could get you killed.

Denise McNair was my older sister and the only child of my parents at that time. She was one of the 4 little girls killed in the infamous bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church on September 15, 1963. This tragic part of history could have started my life off in a very different way. My parents could have taught my younger sister and I to hate all White people; they could have taught us to be very bitter and angry. Thank God that is not who they were. My parents were very loving and God-fearing people who taught us to love everyone. They taught us not to judge people for how they looked or by any other superficial basis. Most of all, they taught us to love each person as Jesus Christ loved us.

Daddy did not fellowship on Sundays with Mamma at 16th Street Baptist Church. He was a member of St. Paul Lutheran Church near Titusville. It was a small congregation of no more than 300 people, and all of them were African American except for five. The pastor, Rev. Joseph Ellwanger, his wife, and their three children were all White. Knowing Rev. Ellwanger and his family gave me the wonderful opportunity to realize that all White folks did not hate me. Some of them loved us and wished us no ill will. Some even wanted to be our friends.

My Mamma, my younger sister, Kim, and I attended and were members of 16th Street Baptist Church until 1983. I later joined Sardis Baptist Church which also had a predominantly Black congregation. Around the year 2000, I began to search for a new church home and I visited a number of houses of worship in the Greater Birmingham area. My friends, the Brantleys, who had previously attended Sardis but were then Dawson members, invited me to be their guest one Sunday.

Dawson was not new to me. For many years, I had watched the service on TV on Sunday mornings while I got ready to attend my church. Daddy really enjoyed watching Dr. Gary Fenton preach, and also his predecessor, Dr. Edgar Arendall.

It was fun to share that spiritual time with Daddy. While we were children, Kim and I chose to fellowship mostly with Mamma at 16th Street instead of with Daddy at St. Paul. We always felt guilty for not going to church with him. Watching Dawson with Daddy felt like our special time of worship together. So, when the Brantleys invited me, I was very excited to actually be at the church I had viewed on TV for so many years. I had a wonderful time that day, and after the service, I even got to meet Dr. Fenton. He was so nice to me and he spoke fondly of my Daddy who he knew from the Rotary Club.

After that, I continued to visit Dawson but maintained my membership at Sardis. I attended Sardis on the 1st and 3rd Sundays because those were the days I sang in the choir, and the rest of the time I would attend Dawson. I even joined a Sunday School class at Dawson. It was a class for singles in my age group taught by Debbie Moss. Everyone I encountered was so nice to me and a lot of fun to be around. I also participated in many other activities there, including a women's lunch group that met once a month. I really enjoyed that.

Dawson was full of so many things to do. It gave me many interesting ways to fill my time as a single person. At this point in my life almost all of my friends were married and had children, and I had neither a husband nor children. Sometimes, it can be a very lonely existence when it seems like everyone around you is paired up, but I felt whole and fulfilled with all the activities and new friends that Dawson offered.

This visiting back and forth went on for quite some time—years in fact. I wanted to join Dawson, but I had reservations because I was Black and the vast majority of the members were White. But no one had ever made me feel unwanted. Sure, there was the occasional person who looked at me as if to say, 'What are you doing here?' or sometimes when walking in the hallway I would say, "Good Morning" and would receive no reply.

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Lisa at her Sunday School Class Christmas social.

But those occasions were very rare. I also kept thinking about my family's history. We were part of Civil Rights history—a tragic part that happened right here in Birmingham. How was I going to join a large White church? What would people say? Would Black people think I had sold out? Would I be accepted there once I was a member? There were other Black people at Dawson but probably not more than 1% of us in attendance. And being that I was a tither, would it be wrong to tithe at a church that had so much in the way of resources, taking money away from a church in my own part of town that I knew needed it to help people who looked like me?

More questions came. Would I be okay joining a choir that most likely would NEVER sing the gospel music the way I was used to hearing and singing it at Sardis? What would my parents say? What would my sister say? We both had White friends, but this was going to really be different. No one in my immediate family had ever been a member of an all-White congregation. I knew the answers to all the questions. It didn't matter what anyone else would say because this was my walk with the Lord, not theirs. I had already been accepted by so many people at Dawson, and I wasn't even a member yet.

Being in the minority, though, was not a problem. I was often the minority in things or even the only Black person in the room for most of my life. And the issue with tithing was completely squashed because I knew for a fact that Dawson's mission work had helped a lot of people of color in Birmingham.

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I was still hesitant. This would be a big move. I prayed and asked God to please let me know what to do. And I asked Him for one of those clear signs that He had sent me before so that it would be unequivocal. I decided that I would not do anything different from what I was already doing until I received that sign.

His answer did not come right away. Months passed by, and I continued to attend both churches. Finally, one Sunday when I attended Dawson, I saw a lady who had attended Sardis with me. I didn't know that she had also been visiting Dawson for almost as long as I had. After the service, we walked together and talked about Dawson. She said that she really enjoyed it, but then went on to share all the reasons why she had not joined yet. Most of her reasons were my reasons, but they made no sense when she said them.

That was it! That was the sign I had been waiting for from God. As she was still talking, all I could hear in my head was, "I am going to join Dawson next Sunday!" And that is exactly what I did in September 2003. A year later, I joined the Sanctuary Choir, too. (I love the music we sing, but I still miss gospel music so I play it when I'm in the car.) Now, it has been almost 20 years since I first became a member at Dawson. I have made friends here that I will have for life. These people are family to me. We've been through everything together: weddings, births, and deaths.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said this about death in the eulogy he wrote for Denise's funeral: "Death comes to every individual. There is an amazing democracy about death. It is not aristocracy for some of the people, but a democracy for all of the people. Kings die and beggars die; rich men and poor men die; old people die, and young people die. Death comes to the innocent, and it comes to the guilty. Death is an irreducible common denominator of all men."

Dr. King was right. Death comes to everyone whether you are Black or White, but it seems to hurt even more when a young person dies prematurely. Sadly, racism, the thing that killed my sister when she was just 11 years old, has reared its ugly head again with a vengeance. It has been hard to watch. Over the years, my heart has been broken by the things I have heard people say and do, especially people who are a part of the body of Christ. One time, when my heart was particularly heavy, I took my questions straight to the Lord.

"Why do so many of my White brothers and sisters still hate us? Why do they still hold onto the sin of racism in their hearts? How can so many of them still say they love God who they have never seen and hate their brother and sister who they see every day?" This breaks my heart as an African American, but also as a fellow sister in Christ. Jesus has mandated that we love each other, no matter what.

At that moment, I believe God revealed something for me to really think about. Was it not true that many White people had learned how to be racist from their own families—parents, grandparents, aunts, or uncles? These were the same people who also taught them all other sorts of life lessons. And these were people whom they loved and respected. And, if that were the case, would it not be hard to go against their teaching or to even question their beliefs?

I thought about all of those things and then wondered how did that make it okay? Then I felt God telling me to put myself in their shoes. At first, I was like, "That doesn't have anything to do with me, Lord." (Jesus and I talk openly like that.) "I am not racist. I have never discriminated against anyone. My people are the ones who have been discriminated against." Then He brought to mind, ever so gently as He often does, someone close to home.

I began to think about my maternal grandmother, who we called Dear Dear. Dear Dear was a beautiful woman. She was very accomplished. She was born in 1906 and attended Alabama State, one of our historically Black College and Universities, where she earned her degree. This was extremely rare because during this time many of her contemporaries could only find work as maids for White families over the mountain. She and my granddaddy lived in a large two-story house near UAB. My granddaddy had his own dry cleaning store, Social Cleaners. They did very well for Black people during that time. Dear Dear believed in family, and if one person had something we all would get a piece of it. We supported each other in every way. We were family, and we were to love each other.

For much of the the time when my sister and I were in elementary and high school, Dear Dear came to live with us during the week to help Mamma take care of us. Daddy had been elected to the state legislature and had to be in Montgomery for at least 3 days a week when they were in session. Each day, after we left for school, Dear Dear would make up our beds and put our stuffed animals on top. Then she would put a pile of candy in front of them. When we got home, Dear Dear would say that the dolls had gone shopping and had brought us back some candy. We loved that! (We knew that she had purchased the candy, but we went along with it because it was so sweet.)



Lisa's grandmother, Dear Dear.

Dear Dear did so many wonderful things and she was always very kind and loving. But, for all of the good she did one bad thing. She hated White people to her core.

Our parents had placed Kim and me in a predominantly white private school, and Dear Dear hated that idea. I remember when I became a teenager, she made a point of telling me, "Don't you dare bring a White boy to this house." She didn't know that back then a White boy would never have asked a Black girl out anyway. Dear Dear was always polite in public, but boy, did she speak ill of White people at home.

Some might say that she had a right to feel that way. She grew up before our country was desegregated, and growing up in the Jim Crow South was

very difficult. Some might also say that her feelings were to be expected. Her first grandchild was killed at church for no reason. Only one person was convicted of her murder after 14 years, and the other killers weren't brought to justice until after Dear Dear had died.

Thinking about Dear Dear brought me back to the question I first asked God. Maybe those White brothers and sisters who still look at me differently are remembering the Dear Dears in their lives; relatives who meant so much to them, but on this one issue they were wrong. Maybe that relative is still living and it would be challenging to openly expressthat they no longer hate. Or just maybe they would be brave enough to break the cycle of hate like my parents did for my sister and me. Mamma and Daddy taught us to love one another with a different kind of love. The kind that Jesus teaches us about—loving our neighbor as ourselves.

I asked God to forgive Dear Dear, but I chose not to think like her. That would not please the Lord, nor would that bring harmony to the body of Christ. I love her for all the wonderful lessons she taught me, but on hating others because of their skin color, she was definitely wrong.

Next year, it will be 60 years since Denise and the other three girls were killed. That's more than enough time to end racism and get right with our neighbors. As followers of Jesus, we have to be the example of what's right in our city, our state, and our country. We, the body of Christ, really have to work on this and get this right. If we are not careful, we are going to miss a whole generation of young people who will not understand how we can love Christ and not love our neighbor. They may think Christianity isn't the way and that would be very sad. I know I cannot live without Christ. Life is hard and at the end of the day, He is all we have to lean on.



**Lisa McNair** travels the country sharing her story of loss, love and reconciliation through her company, Speak Lisa. In September, she will release her memoir *Dear Denise: Letters To The Sister I Never Knew*. Learn more at [www.SpeakLisa.com](http://www.SpeakLisa.com).