

Race Matters
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Matthew 15:21-28

Recently I was listening to a TED talk; these are presentations by experts in a variety of fields who talk about their experiences. A black woman named Verna Myers was speaking about unrecognized biases and how they play out. She does diversity training all over the world and shared that people will come up to her at the beginning of the workshop. "They're like, "Oh, Ms. Diversity Lady, we're so glad you're here but we don't have a biased bone in our body." And I'm like, "Really? Because I do this work every day, and I see all my biases."

She goes on: "I mean, not too long ago, I was on a plane and I heard the voice of a woman pilot coming over the P.A. system, and I was just so excited, so thrilled. I was like, "Yes, women, we are rocking it. We are now in the stratosphere." It was all good, and then it started getting turbulent and bumpy, and I was like, "I hope she can drive." I know. Right. But it's not even like I knew that was a bias until I was coming back on the other leg and there's a guy driving and it's turbulent and bumpy, and never questioned the confidence of the male driver. The pilot is good.

"Now, here's the problem. If you ask me explicitly, I would say, "Female pilot: awesome." But it appears that when things get funky and a little troublesome, a little risky, I lean on a bias that I didn't even know that I had. You know, fast-moving planes in the sky, I want a guy. That's my default. Men are my default.

"Who is your default? Who do you trust? Who are you afraid of? Who do you implicitly feel connected to? Who do you run away from?" (www.ted.com/speakers/verna_myers)

Myers talked a lot about how it takes a willingness on our part to recognize our own bias, and a willingness to call out other people on their biases, even when or especially when it is uncomfortable.

Here we are in Lent, a time when we clean house, a time when we confess our sins, a time when we get real about our actions, our choices and our commitment to follow the life of Jesus.

It is also nearing the end of Black History Month, a month when we pay particular attention to racism, racism against Black folks in particular, and try to be honest about race relations in this country, in our community, in our family, in our own heart. To admit that race matters.

Because that is often the question raised in questions of bias or racism. What matters?

The Black Lives Matter movement got started when Black women could no longer stay silent as they men they loved, for it is mostly men, were gunned down usually unarmed, often by white police officers. These women stood up and said Black lives matter. They were not saying that other lives did not matter. But the reality that played out in their neighborhoods was that black lives did not matter. And in Ferguson when unarmed man Michael Brown was shot by a white police office and then lay in the street for four hours with no medical help called, it was a clear case that his life, his black life, did not matter. And so came a movement.

One UCC pastor commented, "The question for the Black Lives Matter movement is not whether black lives matter to God; we know black lives matter to God. The question is whether or not the world realizes that Black lives matter."

In the scripture reading today we hear about Jesus traveling with his disciples, preaching and healing and teaching. A Canaanite woman comes to Jesus and asks for help for her daughter who is possessed by a demon. The woman is called a Canaanite, an old name for a traditional enemy of the Israelites. She has also been called the SyroPhoenician woman denoting where she came from.

She comes to Jesus, calls him "Sir," recognizing his role as a rabbi, and names him "son of David." She knows his lineage. She, even more than the disciples, knows who Jesus is, what he can do, where he is from, his connection to the divine. "Sir my daughter is possessed by a demon."

And Jesus ignores her, refuses to speak to her. Does not help her or the suffering child. He walks away. Why?

Because this woman is SyroPhoenician. She is Canaanite. His blessings, his healings, are for the children of Israel.

Since when? Since when are Jesus' ministry limited or denied?

In this moment I believe we crash into Jesus' own bias and prejudice.

Now I must tell you that when I was in seminary and I went in front of the committee on ministry to talk about my call, I presented to them a sermon on this text, a sermon that talked about how Jesus got it wrong, was wrong.

And in that meeting one member was incensed that I dared question the divinity, the character of Jesus by essentially calling Jesus a racist. "Jesus is the son of God. You must change this sermon!" he practically yelled.

Yet here I am again saying that I believe Jesus is wrong, was wrong, and for whatever reason, the writers of the gospel include this text to show us even Jesus gets it wrong in this essential way. So I understand if my words today make you mad. But the gospel message for us and the good news for us is that if he can change, so can we. If we are willing...

Back to the text. Now the SyroPhoenician woman won't leave it alone. Jesus' rudeness, denial, and silent refusal does not keep her away. The disciples complain to Jesus that she won't leave them alone. She talks and begs and makes noise. She keeps petitioning and begging and returning.

She finally comes at Jesus again, falling at his feet, begging, and saying "Help me, sir."

And Jesus calls her a dog. A deep, ugly insult. Her daughter a dog. She is not worthy, not deserving. Her daughter can just suffer. And she quickly says, "even the dogs get crumbs."

What she said, what she as much as yelled, as she had been doing all week, was "SyroPhoenician lives matter!" Not more than Israelite lives. Not more than Samaritan lives. Not more than anyone else's life.

But they matter. SyroPhoenician lives matter.

Whose lives matter to us?

Racism is racial prejudice plus power. That is the definition. Racial prejudice plus power. Racism confers certain privileges on and defends the dominant group, which in turn sustains and perpetuates racism. Both consciously and unconsciously, racism is enforced and maintained by the legal, cultural, religious, education, economic, political and military institutions of societies. Racism is more than just a personal attitude. It is the institutionalized form of that attitude ... it is both overt and covert.

People who teach anti racism training tell us that racism has four realms. It starts with the personal: What do we value? What do we assume to be normative? What do we think or feel about others? What are our stereotypes?

Then comes the interpersonal realm. This is when we act on those fears, prejudices and stereotypes in conscious and unconscious ways.

This is where we see Jesus today. His inner prejudices, his stereotypes about this woman, her heritage and background, the kind of people she comes from, where she lives, come out. He acts out of that prejudice to say, "no. I will not heal your daughter. You are not worthy."

The third realm of racism is the cultural. What is normative in our culture? What is considered beautiful: what color skin or what style of hair? What is normal? What is right? What do we picture when we make America great? What does that look like?

So also in the church. What is the norm of a pastor look like? Are you expecting someone white as your settled pastor? Someone who is able bodied and does not use a wheelchair? Someone with kids? What is the norm?

I have had several experiences in Lexington that remind me of the cultural realm of racism. Many, many people have told me how Lexington has changed over the past 5-10 years or so. I have heard how the town has diversified.

I have been told that folks don't recognize the town anymore. When I ask what someone means I hear "it is because the faces are so different" (meaning more brown), that the housing prices are so high and "families are different" (meaning more than one generation living together). I've been told that "the library looks so Asian it doesn't 'look like Lexington.'"

What underlies all this is that the norm for Lexington is white. That the norm for families are nuclear. That the norm is homogeneous. That's cultural racism.

Lexington is changing. Many Asian-American families have moved into the area. The town has a lot more religious and cultural diversity.

And Lexington struggles with racism. Two of our Pilgrim folks, Mona Roy and Ed Bond, helped organize the MLK Day of Action which this year looked at rates of discipline among Lexington students and found that students of color (and students who are disabled) experience far greater rates of detention and expulsion than white students.

Which is how we end up at the fourth realm of racism: institutional. The policies, practices, rules and procedures that intentionally or unintentionally grant unearned privileges to white people and disadvantage people of color is institutional racism.

We have to ask ourselves: what are our biases---as a person, as a community--Lexington is certainly not alone as changes come to all communities in this area, Arlington, Winchester, Bedford, Needham, Concord.

And as a church? This institution?

Are we willing to face these biases, personally, and as a church?

Barbara Lundblad, Lutheran preacher and professor, says that, "Jesus was converted that day to a larger vision of the commonwealth of God. Jesus saw and heard a fuller revelation of God in the voice and in the face of the Canaanite woman."

The Syrophenician's daughter was healed, yes. But the bigger healing I believe was within Jesus himself. His small view of the world, of those in and those out in the eyes of God, his prejudices, were taken on and conquered by a poor woman begging at his feet who refused to go away.

Syrophenician lives matter.

Two thousand years later racism continues in the world. What are we going to do about it?

We can no longer be color blind. The problem is not whether we see color, it is what we do when we do. What will we do? To quote Verna Myers some more: "biases are the stories we make up about people before we know who they actually are. But how are we going to know who they are when we've been told to avoid and be afraid of them? So I'm going to tell you to walk toward your discomfort."

We don't walk away like Jesus did. But we start to open up to those who are different. To lives that don't mirror our own.

And then, even harder: When we see something, we have to have the courage to say something, even to the people we love.

Myers says: "You're gathered with your family, you've got to listen to the conversations around the table. You start to see things like, "Grandma's a bigot." "Uncle Joe is racist." And you know, we love Grandma and we love Uncle Joe. We do. We know they're good people, but what they're saying is wrong. And we need to be able to say something."

I nearly choked when Myers said this in her talk. My grandmother was a lovely lady. Petite. Soft spoken. Calm. And one day during a visit I was watching tv with her--she loved NFL football--and she said, "well, I liked it better before they interviewed the n-----s."

The N word. I was in such shock. I had never heard the word used out loud before. And here it was coming out of my 85 year old grandmother. "Grandma is a bigot!"

And I was silent. Silent, shocked, stunned.

But that is not enough. I needed to say something. When we hear something, we have to say something. And that is hard. Really, really hard. Especially if it is our family. Or a good friend. Or someone we work with. Or someone here at church.

Jesus changed. He did. The Syrophenician woman called him out. She challenged his limited, bigoted view. He finally heard the woman, and saw his own prejudice getting in the way. And after praising the woman's faith, the daughter was healed.

We can be healed and we can heal our nation, our community, our family, our church, but only if we are willing. Willing to do the hard work of calling out racism as we see it.

It is Lent. It is the season of hard work. Let's get to work on racism. In the name of Jesus, who leads us even in his own transformation, Amen.