

“Transforming the World: Dignity and Diversity”
Matthew 15: 21-28

As we continue our sermon series on Transforming the World, I invite you to look with me at the need for the transformation and healing of our prejudices, fears of the other, and systemic racism. I am well aware that this is not a simple topic to handle and that the 15 minutes I have will only scratch the surface of such a difficult and complex issue in our country and world today. What I am interested in is to help us engage this issue with our faith and relationship to God to open our hearts to where God may need to expand our hearts and minds. So to begin, I would like to invite us to share what comes to our minds when we think of racism (allow time for sharing: Starbucks training against racism, the separation of families at the border, fear, hate, systems that disadvantage people, etc.). It is certainly not easy to talk about this, especially when most of us are identified as white. We may want to think of racism as something that others do because we have never participated in a white supremacy group or would never think of ourselves as prejudiced. Yet, I believe that if we are to bring healing and transformation to our world so that all of God’s children may live in peace and dignity, we have no choice but to deal with our challenges around race and prejudice.

I know that for me, I never thought of myself as someone with racial or religious basis. It was nothing that my parents openly talked about. Yet, when I started taking my faith in Jesus Christ more seriously, I became aware of the many prejudices that were so deeply embedded in my culture both on personal and communal levels. Growing up in Syria, I realized that the Arabs enslaved Africans for a long time. Not only that, the Arab slave trade was even more brutal than the European slave trade which is evidenced by the fact that hardly any African slaves survived in the Middle East or were allowed to have children. It was hard for me to accept that I benefited from a system of racism that enslaved and brutalized people. In addition, there was a subtle personal prejudice against Africans that manifested itself in our language and in our attitudes toward Africans. To give you an example, it is still common place in the Middle East to call an African person, “*abid*” meaning slave. What hurt me deeply in my heart as I began to realize the racism in my Syrian Arab culture is how this system of racism was set up to exploit people and take advantage of their resources. It is interesting that a similar kind of system of racism was set up in our country. And even though slavery has long been gone, the mental construct behind it is still in operation because the roots of racism run deep, even when most of us don’t realize it. I want to show you a clip from a PBS documentary series called “Race: The Power of an Illusion” This clip shows how racism works as a system that disadvantages people. It is about the GI Bill of 1944. In theory, all veterans were supposed to be helped by the bill, but in reality, the bill mostly helped white veterans. Access to housing and to universities was restricted for black people in this country, so even when they had the money to go to college or school, they could not. The whole system then disadvantaged them and made the income and education gap between white and black grow wider. Let’s watch the clip:

<https://youtu.be/JJQw-nGV3jl>

A 2014 article by Nicholas Kristoff shows the results of this kind of disparity for us today: “The net worth of the average black household in the United States is \$6,314, compared with \$110,500 for the average white household, according to 2011 census data . . . The black-white income gap is roughly 40 percent greater today than it was in 1967 . . . Black men in their 20s without a high school diploma are more likely to be incarcerated today than employed . . .”

So how can we as people of faith and with the help of God, bring healing to our world? Let’s look at the example of Jesus dealing with a racial issue. Today’s Bible story from Matthew 15 is about Jesus encountering a woman of a different race who demanded to be included in his circle of healing and grace. The disciples wanted to dismiss her because she was an outsider to them. Where they were and where she came from was the district of Tyre and Sidon which was Canaanite territory on the Mediterranean coast to the north and west of Galilee (map). The citizens were a greatly mixed people who may still have had some Canaanite blood, but they also were diluted by infusions of Syrian and Phoenician elements. They were Gentiles (not Jewish), of course, and thoroughly Hellenized since the time of Alexander the Great. The designation of a Canaanite woman in vs. 22 was typically a Jewish term of disdain. This was even more troubling because Jesus himself tells the woman that she was an outsider. She was someone they didn’t need to pay attention to and who didn’t deserve the crumbs that fell off the table. All she wanted was for Jesus to heal her daughter, but he called her a dog. (Read Matthew 15:21-28) The story is powerful, but it is not nice—“dog” is an insult to a woman who is racialized and it is Jesus, not the disciples, who is doing the insulting. This is of course troubling for many biblical scholars. There are all kinds of interpretations out there of why Jesus would do such a thing. Some scholars say that Jesus was just trying to teach a lesson about bigotry to the disciples and the people around him. Yet, this is kind of hard to accept because in other instances we find Jesus doing the right thing and then teaching about it. Other scholars and homilists have attempted to make this story nice by saying that Jesus was testing the woman because he recognized her strength of character; the two engaged in a mutual exercise of role-playing to teach the disciples a lesson; the exchange was playful and the dogs in question were puppies and pets. All of this is to make sure that we would never think that Jesus was challenged by the woman’s understanding.

I think this story helps us to see that Jesus knew that life and faith were more complex than simple pre-packaged answers. He listened to the woman. He didn’t dismiss her like the disciples wanted him to. He actually engaged her in a conversation where he paid attention to what she had to say and took it into serious consideration even though it was against the norms of his day.

The key in this story is that Jesus engaged the woman, shared his thoughts, listened with openness to her needs, and then included her in this love. If it was up to the disciples, none of this would have happened. They would have quickly removed or silenced the woman, but Jesus was willing to cross the barriers of race and religion in order to bring healing to someone in need. In the same way, when we follow Christ’s way, we are invited to cross boundaries, confess our prejudices, and to bring healing to

the world. What do you think of this story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman and how does it relate to our experience today with race issues?

As you seek to transform and heal racial divisions, here are a few steps to follow based on our story (Screen):

1. Stay: Don't Run Away from Conversations about Race
2. Seek: Find people who are different from you and engage them in conversations about race.
3. Learn: Read or watch documentaries written or produced by people of color about race issues.
4. Pray: Pray to God to give you the courage to speak about race in your family and with your friends.
5. Remember: Affirm each and every day that all are loved and created in the image of God.

I would like to end with a sound clip from Martin Luther King Jr. speaking about how his faith helped him stand up for justice and the dignity of all people. May it inspire and bless you today as you seek to follow Christ in healing and transforming the world:

<https://youtu.be/la-RSTHW0IY>

Amen.