

WGUMC September 9, 2018 James 2:1-9; Mark 7:24-37
“What Would Jesus Say About Racism?”

Abut this time last year, I was reading Michelle Alexander’s book, *The New Jim Crow*. I’d been avoiding it for years, because it’s a devastating read about how we never really got rid of Jim Crow. When we outlawed segregation, we simply replaced it with a more sinister system: mass incarceration. It looks different but the impact is the same. We still have a very large segment of our population that is cut off, segregated, from the blessings of liberty, the benefits of community and the hope of prosperity.

The mass incarceration of black and brown men—aided and abetted by poverty, poor schools, racial profiling, and recent court rulings that make it almost impossible to bring a case of racial discrimination—has had catastrophic effects on African American and Hispanic families, their communities and our society. No matter how you look at it, we’re still living every day with the sordid legacy of slavery.

So this morning, we ask, “What would Jesus say about this country’s original sin of racism?” This isn’t just an academic question. It hits much closer to home than that. What would he say in response to the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville? What would he say about the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson or Trayvon Martin in Florida or Oscar Grant in Oakland or earlier this year Stephon Clark in Sacramento? What would he say about the despicable bullying of an African American student that took place in a dorm room in San Jose?

The truth is that Jesus seldom speaks directly to the situations that are most disturbing to us. So if we want to dare to speak *for* him on any of these issues, we have to learn to think *like* him. The only way I know how to do that is by reading the Bible. Get to know the Bible and you’ll get to know Jesus.

There are some passages that could help us put together what Jesus might say about racial prejudice. In John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “Do not judge by appearances...” [7:24] And in Luke’s Gospel, he

teaches that we must love our neighbor even when that neighbor is a Samaritan. [Luke 10:25-37]. Peter offers an assist in the Book of Acts when he says, “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality.” [Acts 10:34] And Paul seconds with, “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all...[Rom 10:12]

But there is no one passage that’s going to rid us of our racism and there are plenty of passages that have been used to make it even worse: “Slaves obey your masters” [Eph 6:5; Col 3:22] being chief among them.

So, taking some advice from William Sloane Coffin, let’s not use the Bible to try to end this conversation; let’s use it to begin one. One great way to begin a conversation is to look at the lectionary readings in juxtaposition. Our lectionary, which is a three-year cycle of readings for each week, often puts passages together that we would never think to read together, and that’s when we find out that there is much truth in the Bible that can be found not *in* the

texts but *between* them. That's the case this week when we put the Letter of James alongside the Gospel of Mark.

The author of James is calling out church members for showing favoritism, for treating the rich with deference and the poor with indifference. James makes it clear that Christians who make such distinctions are guilty of being judges with evil thoughts. They favor those who are rich in money who are, in fact, no better than the poor who have been chosen by God to be rich in faith. James is crystal clear: this is not OK. When we show partiality, we commit sin.

All well and good until we get to Mark who tells us a story about Jesus making distinctions. In Chapter 7, Jesus is in Tyre, which is foreign territory, Gentile country. And though Jesus is trying to hide, a Syrophenician woman finds him anyway and begs him to heal her daughter of a demon. At first, Jesus refuses by saying that he came for the Jews not for Gentiles, but in doing so, he uses a racial slur. And he can't blame Twitter. This is in the text. He calls the Gentiles *dogs*: "Let the children [of Israel] be fed first, for it is not

fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." [7:27]

Ouch!

For one thing, I don't like what Jesus is implying about dogs, let alone Gentiles. There was an intense prejudice against dogs in the ancient Near East which is why I'm glad I never had to live there. But if this is definitely not a compliment for the woman or her daughter, why does Jesus make it?

There are several possible reasons that have been offered. The traditional interpretation says that Jesus isn't really racist. He is just testing her faith.

Another explanation is that Jesus was in Tyre because he was tired. Jesus gets off the hook here because he's human. He's been preaching and healing and he just needed a break. If he didn't have the energy to save all of the Jews, how was he going to save the Gentiles, too?

But the woman is sharp. She figures that God's love is so powerful that Jesus doesn't even have to lift a finger. All Jesus has

to do is say the word and her daughter will be healed. So she keeps pressing, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” She figures that even the left-overs of God’s love will be enough to save her daughter. And Jesus agrees.

A third possibility, and my favorite one, is that Jesus is still growing into his own self-understanding. Remember, Jesus came to us as a baby, so like any human being, he had to grow [Luke 1:80]. Now was there ever a time that he stopped growing? I don’t think so. Throughout his ministry, his spirit kept getting stronger and stronger until he was strong enough to carry a cross all the way to Calvary.

But when he goes to Tyre, he still has some growing to do, and God uses this brave and wise woman to help him do it. This story tells me that Jesus was teachable. He had to learn that the limits of God’s love are ever expandable. And because he learned to give up his prejudice, that means that we can, too.

This past week, my husband went to his first meeting of Racists Anonymous, held at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Santa Clara. The Rev. Ron Buford was there. He's pastor of the Congregational Community Church in Sunnyvale. Ron started up a 12-step recovery program for racists after the murder of nine members of Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston back in 2015. Since then, he's been written up in the *Washington Post*. He's been on KQED and CBS. The idea has spread to over 90 congregations in four countries. The groups operate on the principle that we are all teachable, and since racism is learned, it can be unlearned.

“My name is Rebecca, and I'm a racist.” We all need to say that, because unless you just got off the boat, you have been living, breathing and bathing in a culture that was born in slavery, raised with segregation, and has now settled into festering racial division. No matter how unbiased we think we are, we can't pretend that our attitudes about race don't figure into where we choose to live, where we send our kids to school, and what streets we're willing to

walk down at night. Race doesn't make all of our decisions for us, but whether we know it or not, we're always making distinctions. And that, according to James, is our transgression.

Those of us who are of Northern European descent seldom stop to think about all the privileges we have that other people don't. When I see a patrol car, I don't have to worry that I am going to be pulled over for no good reason. I don't have to teach my child how to avoid getting shot at if she were ever stopped by the police. When I walk down the street, people don't cross to the other side to avoid me. When I go to the border and present my passport, no one looks at me and thinks it's fake. With a name like Ireland, I can apply for a loan without wondering whether my bank is engaged in red-lining. But having those "privileges" when others don't makes me complicit. So I'm a racist, even when, especially when, I'm not aware of it.

Jesus grew up thinking of Gentiles as dogs. Then he met one. In his encounter with the Syrophenician woman, he unlearned his

prejudice, and so can we. You all have in your bulletin the 12 steps to recovery from racism. I hope you take it home with you. Talk about it with your family members and friends. Go through the steps together. Jesus grew; so can you.

It's a process. When he first started out, Jesus thought the Good News was primarily for the Jews. Then he learned that the Gospel was for all people. And, sure enough, as the Jesus movement grew, it became more Gentile than Jewish. I guess you could say that it went to the dogs! By the time we get to Paul, you hear him expressing a truth that hasn't been fully realized in the Church even to this day. Paul says, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." [Gal 3:28]

So what would Jesus say about the racism in us and around us? I think he'd say what Paul said. And what would Jesus have us do about it? He'd have us go into "Gentile territory" and meet people of different races. He'd have us listen to them and learn from them.

And then he'd want us to do for them what he did for the other Gentile in our reading today.

After learning his lesson from the Syrophenician woman, Jesus travelled into the region of the Decapolis, where he met a Gentile man who could neither hear nor speak. So Jesus used his power to make sure that this man could not only hear the Good News but also find his voice and speak his truth.

We who are privileged have far more power than we think we do, and we can use it to bring the Good News to people who would otherwise not be able to hear it. We also have the power to shut up and listen. And by listening, we create some space in the airwaves and in our brainwaves for a voice to be heard that has never been heard before.

I got a call out of the blue a couple of weeks ago from Rodrigo Abarca. Hmm. The name sounded familiar. In the mid 70's Rodrigo's father fled with his family from Chile after President Allende was overthrown in a coup. With the backing of the U.S.

Augusto Pinochet seized power and became dictator. As fate would have it, through his job, Rodrigo's father had ties to the Allende government and that made his family a target. Former Willow Glen pastor Wayne Williams got a phone call. "We have a refugee family. Can you find them housing?" Wayne set them up in the old house that is now part of our preschool. Rodrigo's dad became our church custodian and Rodrigo helped him out. He told me that his job was to polish the brass cross on the altar.

So Rodrigo grew up here and, several years ago, met Silvia, who had escaped threats of deadly violence in El Salvador. In the past year, she became a U.S. citizen, and they are getting married here on the 29th. In America today, their voices need to be heard. Their love story needs to be told. When I met them, I said, "Thank you. I needed to hear an immigration story with a happy ending." And now, God has given Willow Glen the opportunity not just to hear a good story but to be a part of it again.

Jesus said to the man whose ears couldn't hear and whose tongue couldn't talk, *Eph' pha · tha*, which means, "Be opened." And that I believe is what Jesus would say to us if we were to ask him how we might bring an end to racism. Jesus had to be opened, and so do we. *Eph' pha · tha*.