

Race and Economics

James 2:1-10, 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

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I. Introduction

In 1952 the Boston Symphony Orchestra was trying to figure out why they were so male-dominated and so they started doing auditions for new orchestral positions in a blindfolded way. The people who were listening to the auditions were in front of a curtain and the potential performers would come out and play and then they would get assessed. To their surprise, after even doing blind tests, they still found their hiring to be very male-skewed. A lot more men got hired than women.

Now one thing they could have done with that is just figure, well, in this particular area maybe the men are better prepared or better trained and that's just what we have to work with. But one of their very clever staff people suggested that they not only do the tests blind but they suggested that all the performers take their shoes off as they walked to where they performed, and after they did that the rate of callbacks was about 50/50. Now what's interesting there from my standpoint is here was a group of people who knew that they had been bringing a certain set of eyes or ears to this endeavor and they wanted to do better at it, but their way of seeing the world was so deeply ingrained that even though they wanted to be bias-free, they were still subconsciously picking up on the foot tread of the performers and figuring out which were men and which were women and their bias still found a way of inserting itself.

This is what bias is about. This is about what racism is about. There are certainly overt, explicit, ugly racist things that happen in our country obviously and around the world as we see in a lot of the dialogues around the refugees from Syria happening right now. But, by and large, the struggle that we have with racism really has more to do with all of the unconscious biases that we bring to our engagement with people who are different than we are.

We have been engaged as a nation for over a year now since Ferguson happened a year ago last month in a lot of very deep and hard conversations about race. And after the shootings in South Carolina last June, the bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal Church invited our country to be in a more intentional kind of dialogue about race, and our United Methodist Women nationally have chosen to focus us on this issue this year. The graphic that is on the bulletin this morning is actually an invitation from Young Jin Cho, the bishop of the Virginia Annual Conference, for us to take today specifically as a day of repentance and reflection on the issue of racism.

So, as a congregation we're going to be taking this September to dig into this issue a little bit. We're going to be using the lectionary texts, they're the texts that the church has laid for these four Sundays in September. But we're going to be looking at them through the lens of racism and race reconciliation and race relations. We're going to

talk about race and economics, race and language, race and housing, race and gender. And I think it's going to be a really important opportunity for us to be in dialogue about this together.

II. Jesus Corrected

This is uncomfortable topic for many of us who are white and don't have to experience what racism feels like. A lot of the reading that I've been doing interestingly in preparation for this sermon series has been really about a lot of the pushback that white people essentially bring to the conversation, and the level of discomfort is really interesting and notable. So, I felt very blessed that our lectionary Gospel text this morning talks about this exact issue as something Jesus was wrestling with too. We have this very powerful and uncomfortable story in which Jesus engages this Syrophenician woman out of the implicit bias and racism of his culture. As you heard Janet tell the children, in a very pejorative and dismissive way, he addresses her request that if it had come from a Jew he would have dealt with very quickly and easily. But the woman pushes back.

Interestingly, this is the only story in the entire Gospel of Mark where Jesus loses an argument. But he doesn't respond defensively, he doesn't react aggressively to a person who was not only a different ethnicity but a different gender; because women, of course, didn't engage in that kind of conversation with men in his day. He doesn't respond defensively. He doesn't respond angrily. He hears what she has to say and has a change of heart. This is new information for a lot of us as Christians. Jesus is usually the one who tells us how our hearts need to change. Here we've got this wonderful example of Jesus being confronted and then having a change of heart that then goes on to shape his entire ministry because he was willing to listen in a different sort of way.

III. Allies

So, how do we go about trying to emulate Jesus in this particular way? How do we go about engaging in this conversation in a way that is transformative both for us and for our community? There are a couple of suggestions I want to lay before you: The first of which is that this process always starts from our acknowledgment and increasing understanding of our own place of privilege as white Americans. And when I say "privilege," that's a slightly charged word. What I am not saying is that privilege means that we're all wealthy or that we've all had an easy life. What privilege is about is acknowledging that there are certain things that I will never as a white person have to even consider because being white is the norm and being nonwhite is the other. And so, there are certain aspects of my life that as a white person I never even need to pay attention to because I don't experience them. I've got to be intentional about seeking out what it might be like to not be white, and that intentionality is the process of becoming aware of our own position of privilege.

In a position where white is normal, movies are about white people. You never hear anybody refer to a white movie, right? You hear them refer to a black movie, a Latino movie, and an Indian movie but white is the norm. I don't have to think about that. I don't have to think about the fact that when one of my favorite books, *The Lord of the Rings*, gets made into a movie, every single actress and actor are white. The irony of that, of course, is that it's a fictitious world, it's a fictitious history, they're fictitious races but the assumption is going to be that we hire white people. It means that we never have to think about all of the long years of history that bring us to this place where we are economically in a place where the mean net worth of a white family in our country is \$134,000, the mean net worth of a Latino family is \$14,000, the mean net worth of an African American family is \$11,000. We don't have to think about what brought us to this place. And here's a little clue -- it wasn't all by the hard work and sweat of our brow, right? And I'm not even just talking about 200 years ago slavery history. I'm talking about most of the 20th Century and 21st Century.

When you look at how our communities accumulated wealth, a huge part of that happened in the '30s, '40s, and '50s as the federal government created subsidized housing for people to move into and become more and more middle class. But they only sold that housing to white people. Not only did they only sell it to white people, but it was also federal policy, it was a policy of the Federal Housing Administration that people of color could not move into the subsidized housing. They actually provided language to the developers that got put in the trust clauses of the houses that forbade even white people who bought the houses from selling them to people of color. For decades if you were white you had this wonderful benefit of buying a house, allowing you to appreciate moving in to the middle class while all the people of color watched from the sidelines.

When the GI's came back from World War II, part of the GI Bill was helping veterans find employment but in many, many states across the country, North and South -- this is not a Southern issue -- the GI administrators encouraged companies to post ads that mandated that the person filling the job be white because they wanted to make sure the white veterans got taken care of first. And again, it is all of these dynamics that lead to our current situation where it is still the case that the unemployment rate for African American college graduates is twice that for white people. This whole journey of bias continues, sublimated somewhat but continues. So that the first piece of this healing process requires our acknowledging that and trying to understand how this developed and how we have benefited from the structures that our country has put in place.

The second piece of this has to do with our willingness and ability to listen in a healthy and helpful way. Jesus again models this very powerfully in the story where he really engages this woman, who pushes him and challenges him and he changes. This is an uncomfortable topic for us who are white, and what is interesting and notable in the conversation is how quickly we start doing the talking instead of doing the listening. Because we have all the answers, right? We're very bright and educated and hard working, and so we know how to solve the problem so we right away start moving to

the place of talking instead of listening. And the really critical part of this healing process has to do with our ability and willingness to sit with our discomfort as we hear people share the struggle that they have had as people of color in our country. We're not good at that and we need to practice. We need to stop and we need to listen.

I was so struck in much of the reading that I did how often people of color noted that their primary struggle in this issue is having good, well-intentioned, often liberal people not listen to what they say and then often label them as "angry black men or women."

I heard an interesting interview of a woman who had gone to a grocery store with her sister-in-law. The narrator was African American, the sister-in-law was half-black, half-white but was visibly quite white, and they went through the checkout line together. The sister-in-law wrote a check for her groceries and moved off to the side to wait and then the African American woman came through. She wrote a check for her groceries and the cashier immediately said, "I need two pieces of ID for that." Now the woman, the narrator, had her 10-year-old daughter with her so she understood immediately what was going on but was struggling with how to respond, "How do I engage this in a way that allows someone to hear and not get labeled as the angry black woman?" And she chose not to do anything -- although she was holding her daughter's hand, she could feel her daughter's hand grip tighten. So, she got out her two ID's and handed them to the cashier and then the cashier pulls out a book of checks that had bounced to go through the names, at which point the daughter's eyes are starting to well with tears, and again the woman is trying to figure out, "How do I engage this in a way that I'm going to be heard and not get labeled?"

And at that point, her sister steps up and says, "Why are you doing this?" And the cashier said, quite I suspect honestly and sincerely, "This is company policy." And her sister said, "Well, apparently it's not because you didn't do that to me." And then, the two women behind her in line said, "That's right. You didn't do it for her. Why are you doing it to this woman?" Which segues to my last point which is that we have an absolute obligation as people who had benefited from the privileges of our history to be voices on this issue. I just said we need to listen and we do, but when we find ourselves in places where we see unconscious bias -- it doesn't have to be overt, explicit, nasty racism, or whenever we see places where bias is happening -- it becomes our imperative to name that, to speak it, because that gets heard in a different kind of way.

IV. Conclusion

So, we're going to take the next few weeks unpacking some of these issues together and I want to really encourage you to stay engaged on this. We've had so much conversation as a nation, it's easy to start to turn off and just say, "I've heard all of this before." And I want to encourage us not to do that, to keep listening, to keep watching, to keep learning about our own history so that we can understand what's happening around us and like Jesus start to open ourselves to the possibility that we and the world can change.

Amen.