

“Jesus and Racism”

Matthew 15:21-28

Intro

For the last couple of weeks, my soul has been deeply troubled because of what is happening in this nation. The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the deep inequality in the US. [ppt] Some says, “We are in the same storm, but not in the same boat.” Economic inequality has made poor ethnic minorities more vulnerable to Covid-19. As of May 20, 2020, African Americans make up roughly 13% of the U.S. population but nearly 23 % of reported Covid-19 deaths.¹ More disturbingly, racism in this nation is still rampant and even rising. You must have seen and heard about the unjust killing of George Floyd by police officers and the anger and large protests it has sparked across the country. As protests turned to riots, some called violent protesters, “thugs.” “They are breaking the law. They are looting and destroying the properties. We must restore law and order by any means necessary.”

But, I think we first need to try to understand and listen to the anger and frustration of people instead of making hasty judgments. Martin Luther King, Jr. emphasized nonviolent resistance in the struggle for freedom and justice. He opposed riots because they are socially destructive. But he also said, “A riot is the language of the unheard.” I think, it’s worth hearing the voice of Martin Luther King, Jr. [ppt] A riot is the language of the unheard. A riot is the language of the oppressed. A riot is a desperate cry of the marginalized and unseen.

I strongly oppose riots and violence but we first have to understand the anger and frustration of people due to the unfulfilled promise of racial justice and equality. Simply condemning a riot as unlawful and illegal isn’t enough. It can be another act of ignoring and silencing the desperate voice of the unheard. We as the church must listen to their voices, and repent our individual and corporate sin of racism and stand with our brothers and sisters of color for justice and peace.

The Church has been silent on the issue of racism in our society for far too long. Racism is opposite the good news of God in Jesus Christ, for all people. Racism is in clear contradiction to our fundamental Christian belief that all people regardless their skin color, nationality and ethnicity are created in the divine image of God. We need to work together to overcome the racism that is deeply embedded in our society and within our consciousness.

Canaanite woman is excluded because of her ethnicity

In fact, Racism is not a recent phenomenon. Racism has plagued humanity for thousands of years. Even in the time of Jesus, racism and racial supremacism were widespread among the Israelites.

Jews basically saw themselves as God’s chosen people and tried to keep their holiness by strictly observing purity laws. There is nothing wrong with this. Developing one’s identity in relation to God and trying to live a holy life as people of God is a good thing.

However, their sincere religious devotions to God headed in a wrong direction as they tried to clearly separate the pure/ (and) impure, the holy/ (and)unholy, and the clean/ (and) unclean. Of course, the Jewish people of the first century considered Gentiles to be “unclean,” calling them “dogs” and “the uncircumcised.” They believed that contact with these unclean people also made them unclean.

¹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/27/as-us-coronavirus-deaths-cross-100000-black-americans-bear-disproportionate-share-of-fatalities.html>

Perhaps, this general racist social atmosphere had an influence on Jesus' disciples and even Jesus himself. In today's text, we meet a very strange Jesus. We believe that Jesus loves all people, particularly the poor and social outcasts. We believe that Jesus is compassionate to all people in need and always helped them by comforting, healing, feeding and teaching them. But in today's text, Jesus seems different from the Jesus we are used to reading about.

A Canaanite woman came and pleaded[플리-디드], "Mercy, Master, Son of David! My daughter is cruelly afflicted by an evil spirit." This is a desperate mother's cry for help. What was Jesus' first reaction to her? Surprisingly, Jesus ignored her. Jesus didn't respond to her plea and kept going his way, as if he had heard nothing. We all know how horrible it feels when our dire[다이어리] requests for help are met with dead silence. Feelings of being ignored, unheard, and unseen. And Jesus just ignored this poor woman's desperate cry for help.

But this woman does not give up. She continues to follow and shout out for help. She is protesting in some sense and refuses to be ignored. Then, "The disciples came and complained, "Teacher! Now she's bothering us. Would you please take care of her? She's driving us crazy." It appears that they are annoyed by her continued shouting but they do not really have any sympathy for her. Jesus' disciples without love?? Shame on them! right?

However, we are not very different from those disciples. Too often we as a church refuse to stand with people of color, the marginalized and the social outcast. When we see the death of George Floyd and the death of Ahmaud Arbery[아머드 아머리], we feel sorry for them and their family but we as a church often fail to act for justice on their behalf.

You must have heard many good Christians say, "it's horrible that an innocent black man was killed, but destroying property has to stop." Can you find out what's wrong with this statement? It prioritizes wrong part. Instead, we have to say, "it's horrible that property is being destroyed, but killing innocent black men has to stop."

Most churches are good at charity work but mostly silent on justice issues because we misunderstand justice as a political issue not a faith issue. So, we unwittingly support this unjust social system of oppression against African Americans and ethnic minorities and let our brothers and sisters of color continues to be suffocated by systemic racism. As long as the oppression, injustice, or pain does not occur in our house and neighborhood, we simply dismiss it as an unwelcomed, unfortunate noise.

As the Canaanite woman continued her plea for help, Jesus harshly said, "It's not right to take bread out of children's mouths and throw it to dogs." Jesus not only refused her request but humiliated her by referring to her as a dog. Can you imagine Jesus not only rejecting your prayers but saying to you, "go away dog! Don't bother me anymore." It is really difficult to understand why Jesus acted like this. But one thing for sure is that this woman is excluded and forced to be silent because of her ethnicity. It looks like racism wins in this story.

Many people today still are marginalized by racism

This story of the poor Canaanite woman is not so strange even today. We can easily spot similarities between the story of the Canaanite woman and that of African Americans and ethnic minorities here in the United States today. Many people are mistreated and excluded from our society because of their skin color, nationality, religion and sexual orientation. But their desperate voices and pleas for help are often ignored by our society and even by us.

George Floyd's desperate plea "I can't breathe" was ignored by police officers. Michael Brown Jr., raised his hands and pleaded, "don't shot" but his desperate cry was ignored and he was shot dead. Some NFL players knelt during the national anthem to peacefully protest

police brutality and oppression against African Americans and then, some politicians framed their nonviolent act as unpatriotic and the NFL banned players from kneeling in protest and make them unseen and their desperate plea for justice unheard.

Please don't say that they are breaking laws. Laws has been unequal to people of color. According to a study, "Unarmed black men are seven times more likely than whites to die by police gunfire." Also, "African-American defendants get more time behind bars — sometimes twice the prison terms of whites with identical criminal histories."² Many African-Americans are mistreated and oppressed simply because of their skin color.

One of the most common ways of mistreating people is through language. I have been living in the United States for 12 years but I still remember the first day I entered the United States. After a 14 hour long flight, Juhee and I safely landed at the Hartsfield-Jackson[하츠필드-잭슨] Atlanta International Airport. I was a bit excited but... mostly I was very nervous setting foot in a strange land. Everything was foreign to me.

But what made me feel as if I really did not belong in this country was a single sign at the immigration desk. As you may know, immigration desks at airport are divided into two sections: one for U.S. citizens and another for non-U.S. citizens. I lined up at the non-U.S. citizen section and waited for my turn for almost two hours. Then, I saw this strange sign. *Do you know how the sign at the immigration desk refers to non-U.S. citizens?* "Alien," not 'foreigner, not 'non-U.S. citizen' but "Alien."(P) "Well... I know I am not a U.S. citizen... but I am not a strange weird creature with a big head and sharp tooth found in the "Alien" movie." The term 'alien' is not neutral. Rather it contains negative connotations toward foreigners and immigrants... but this term was officially used at an international airport in 2008. I think this reveals a hidden cultural prejudice and a certain hostile attitude toward foreigners.

The fact that I am a person of color and a racial minority does not mean that I am completely immune from racism. When I first attended Candler School of Theology, Emory University in 2008, I had to complete an internship at a homeless outreach center in downtown Atlanta. I used to go to the outreach center by train where most passengers were African American. I found myself being cautious and alert when I got on the train. I didn't know why at first and then, I came to realize the racial prejudices within me, not seeing others as the image of God, but something else to be feared.

A theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "In a free society, some are guilty but all are responsible." We are all responsible for what had happened to George Floyd. We are responsible for Amaud Arbery. We are responsible for what is happening in our country. We all need to repent for our personal and cooperate sin of racism and the sin of turning away from desperate pleas of the poor Canaanite women and men of today. Repentance is the first step for change.

God's table is large enough for everyone!

Jesus' unfriendly and somewhat racist treatment of the Canaanite woman is puzzling. Some interpret this narrative as Jesus testing the woman; If she passes the test, he will accede[엑시]-드] to her request. But some scholars think that though Jesus was the Son of God, he was also a human being with limitations. We often forget Jesus was also fully human.

Please see this painting by Max Ernst. Do you know the title of this painting? The title of this painting is "The Blessed Virgin Chastising the Infant Jesus." This may be a very provoking painting to some of us. Right? But I think this painting reminds us that Jesus was also fully a

² (New York Times, Dec 16, 2016)

human who grew up, made mistakes and needed to be corrected. Also, he was influenced by the culture he lived in. Jesus was not in his glory yet so he did not know everything as God, the Father did, and he was still learning and growing throughout his ministry.

Remember that Jesus was only a 33 year old young man. I am often surprised by the fact that I am older than Jesus. Almost 10 years! I guess that some of you also have grand children close to Jesus' age. Jesus is our Savior and the Son of God but he was also fully human just like us. So Jesus as a Jewish man of his day was possibly chauvinistic toward non-Jews and felt no responsibility for them.

When Jesus bluntly speaks to her, "It's not right to take bread out of children's mouths and throw it to dogs," she quickly answers, "You're right, Master, but beggar dogs do get scraps from the master's table." This bold Canaanite woman refuses to be ignored and excluded from God's grace and mercy because of her ethnicity. This Canaanite woman believes that God's table is large enough for the house of Israel and that there is more than enough space left over for her. Her bold claim and persistent plea for help amazes Jesus. "Oh, woman, your faith is something else. What you want is what you get!", said Jesus. Feminist biblical scholars argue that Jesus' limited perspective is in part corrected by this woman who convinces him that Gentiles must also share God's bounty. The Canaanite woman's boldness and faith in God's abundant blessings and grace becomes a seed for the mission for the Gentiles, breaking the ethnic and racial boundaries between the Gentiles and the Jews. Her persistence changes Jesus' somewhat racist perspective on Gentiles and extends God's grace toward them.

God's grace is given to all people, We need persistence in resisting racism.

There is enough room for everyone at God's table. Black people are welcomed to God's table. White people are welcomed to God's table. Latians/Latina, Korean, Chinese, Polish, Japanese, Danish, , German, Australian, Pakistani, Egyptians, Jews... everyone is welcome at God's table and there is more than enough room for everyone. The only thing that does not have a place in God's house is hatred toward others. Bigotry has no place in God's house. Racial hatred, white supremacy has no place in God's house. This is what we, as Christians, must boldly witness to the world through our words and actions.

Jesus changed his attitude toward the Canaanite woman as soon as he realized his limited perspective on the Gentiles and God's mission for them. Unlike Jesus, many people in racist groups may not easily change their minds. Our racist systems may not easily change. What we need to do as people of God is to stand with those who weep and suffer in the face of racism and unjust discrimination. We have to boldly call out racism as an evil act and we must persist in claiming that there is no place for racial discrimination and unjust killing of people of color in God's house. Like the Canaanite woman, be bold and be persistent for God's justice.

Some of you may have different opinions on this issue. I am willing to talk with you if you want to share your thoughts with me. But I would like to invite you to join in protesting against racism. Pray for the victims of racism. Pray for the leaders of this country to fear God and have moral consciousness. I hope that Asbury UMC can create a public statement denouncing any act of racism against people of color and express our solidarity with other people for justice. "Silence is complicity." Let us speak out and be with our brothers and sisters in their agony.

I saw a picture on Facebook of a child holding a sign saying "the only thing that should be separated by color is Laundry." Isn't it true? As we persist for God's justice, we are not

standing alone. God will always be with us and will work through our hands. God will be with us all.