

## **“A CIRCLE UNBROKEN”**

Psalm 8; Luke 13:6-17

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As recently as 150 years ago, the Bible was being used to support what we would consider “racist ideology” today. Truthfully, this abuse of the scriptures continues, if not on the scale that it did when it was cited to support the institution of slavery in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century America. Proponents of this view begin with the story of Ham discovering Noah’s nakedness in Genesis 9. It’s an odd story. Basically Noah gets drunk and leaves himself uncovered. Ham stumbles on this indecency and thinks to include his brothers in the fun. But they don’t play along and instead discreetly cover their father up. Somehow Noah knew what happened and is enraged and he curses Ham’s son Canaan. Though there’s no indication that Ham is darker-skinned than his brothers, pro-slavery theologians identified black Africans as descendants of Canaan and therefore under the curse and obviously inferior.

Sounds a bit far-fetched to us, but the Bible does leave some room for the idea that God does play favorites, that God prefers some groups of people over others. God chooses Abel’s offering over Cain’s, saves Noah’s family over the rest of humanity, chooses Abraham and Sarah to make for Godself a people. God chooses Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, David over all his older brothers. This choosing takes a rather violent turn when Joshua leads the former slaves of Egypt into the Promised Land, the land of Canaan. If you read closely, you discover that the current occupants are indeed descendants of Canaan and Esau. The conquest of Canaan is among the most difficult stories of scripture to read because it seems to sanction genocide, the most extreme form of racism.

In 1967, Presbyterians wrote a new confession addressing the issue of racism and calling for the church to engage in acts of reconciliation, to heal the divide that had grown between races and ethnic groups. In 1996 and again in 2014, the General Assembly called on the church to review its understanding and strategies for addressing racism. Anti-racism training is being encouraged at all levels of the denominational structure, from General Assembly staff to small congregations. The literature surrounding this movement is more concerned to lift up the biblical mandate for justice than it is to account for far-fetched interpretations of difficult scriptures. I think they are right to focus their energies this way, but I can’t help making a couple of comments that I think have a bearing on the modern struggle against racism.

To begin with, the curse of Canaan comes not from God, but from Noah. The divine sanction for slavery that later theologians read into the story is a complete fabrication. The apparent divinely sanctioned violence of Joshua’s conquest is more difficult to explain, but here’s one way to read that story: we can see it as a warning. One of the things that human beings are known to do as a way to justify their grab for power is to claim divine authority for their actions.

What if we understood the conquest of Canaan not as a series of mighty victories for their God, but as a tragic misunderstanding of God's desire for the world? Consider that the inhabitants of Canaan are family, people who share a common ancestor with the invading army of Israel. They have left off worshipping God and turned to idols. In other words, like Cain, their offerings were unacceptable to God. Seen this way, what we have is a reverse Cain and Abel story where Abel, the righteous Israel, murders Cain, the unrighteous Canaanites. Do we really imagine then that the God who protected Cain now wants to remove that protection from his descendants?

For my purposes today, this is what I want you to remember from this tragic story of the conquest. First, that this "holy war" is a struggle that takes place within one family. There are not two peoples, not two races. These are brothers struggling for power and land. This is a story of a "broken circle" and hence a warning to all who would see themselves as better than another.

Second, the image of God in this story contradicts the dominant image of God in the Old Testament and actually violates God's rules for healthy community that we see in the Ten Commandments. This is not the God who creates the world and calls it good, not the God who says to the first couple, "Be fruitful and multiply." This is not the God who marks Cain in order to protect his life, not the God who calls Abraham and Sarah so that they and their descendants can be a blessing to the earth, and this is not the God whom the Psalmist claims made human beings only a little lower than the angels.

So what does any of this have to do with racism today? Scientists and sociologists are pretty much agreed that "race" is a social construct, not a biological reality. Race was an invention to justify the economic exploitation and abuse of certain groups of people. The invention of race allowed even the abolitionists to view darker-skinned people as inferior, lesser humans. The invention of race is what keeps us from recognizing those with a different skin color as the brothers and sisters that they are.

Racism and prejudice are not the same thing. Prejudice reflects the personal feelings we have and express in certain circumstances. Prejudice is about our personal likes and dislikes and may be influenced by racism but racism itself is systemic. Prejudice feels uncomfortable in the face of differences, but racism exploits those differences.

Some suggest that the solution is to become color blind. Many deny being racist because they claim that they don't judge others by the color of their skin. But this fails to take into account the history of exploitation that stands behind racism.

Take for example, the GI Bill for returning veterans of World War 2. A considerably larger percentage of "white" veterans than black veterans received a college education as a result of that bill. This is not because black veterans were uninterested in college, but because as a group they faced more and larger impediments to enrolling in a college. One could argue that a program designed to reward veterans for their service to country was in effect an affirmative action program for white soldiers. What's often

not acknowledged is the impact this would have had for future generations. The growing disparity between rich and poor during the last few decades has been even more deeply felt in African and Hispanic American families because as a rule they have had fewer supports.

The struggle against racism is not simply about overcoming one's own prejudicial instincts. The problem is systemic and our silence allows it to continue. We can't ignore the reality that our criminal justice system is seriously broken. A black person accused of a crime, even if innocent, is still more likely to be convicted than a white person. Black people continue to be given longer prison sentences than whites for the same crimes. Privatizing prisons to for-profit corporations has made this injustice even more prominent.

Let me acknowledge here that I know I am preaching to an almost entirely white congregation. Talking about racism may sound like I'm just accusing us of being horribly sinful, concluding that we are mostly responsible for the tragedy of racism. This is not my point, nor am I trying to say how horrible America is. I believe that we are very interested in addressing injustices, in struggling against incidents of racism, that we try very hard not participate in acts of bigotry. The problem is huge and it is very easy to become discouraged.

But we need to keep trying. We need to understand the mechanisms and the subtleties about racism better. I hope you will look at some of the resources on the insert, especially because I can't begin to address the complexities of the issues. But one thing is certain. Martin Luther King was so right when he said that racism hurts us all; that the struggle for the freedom of blacks in America is caught up with the freedom of whites. We are either all free or none of us are. We are either all whole or all broken. We will either all come to recognize our kinship and learn to love one another or we will continue to vie for mastery of the other.

So what does this have to do with Jesus and the healing of a crippled woman in the sanctuary on the Sabbath? I think we have a warning here more easily understood than the holy war of the book of Joshua. Jesus said plainly enough to the leader of the synagogue that the rules of our faith are not intended to interfere with the wholeness of God's people. The Sabbath is a time not when we cease from all work, but when we devote ourselves to the work of God, when we see to the health and welfare of every member of the household of God.

Sometimes we too use worship, the sanctuary as an excuse to ignore the realities of the world. We come here to be refreshed, to have our spirits renewed. That's all true. Life is hard and we need that reminder of God's love for us. But we can't do this and ignore the crippled woman in our midst. It is, in fact, especially in the sacred moments of worship, that faith should take notice of need. Part of our Presbyterian heritage, the great ends of the church urge us to be an "exhibition of the kingdom of God" and to "promote social righteousness" in the world.

God has made us all a little lower than the angels. We are one family, one humanity, and we have been made for each other, not against one another. We are made for love not hate, for respect not spite.

Recall our theme for the year: the gifts of God for the people of God. These are gifts not for ourselves alone but for the sake of the world as well. It is precisely because we are people of faith that the struggle against racism matters to us. Remember... “at Westminster, we live a whole life in response to God, intentionally, together, engaging the world, for the good of all, following Jesus Christ.”

Racism reminds us that we live in a broken world where the cords of our common humanity have been severed. But we gather here each Sunday not just to refresh our souls, but to remember that faith calls us to compassion and reconciliation, and that our intention is to live into that time where the circle is unbroken. May God grant us strength and wisdom and understanding for the journey. Amen.