

Confronting Racism with Jesus

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The Story

The previous lesson pointed out that the church has a checkered past regarding racism. At least at this point in Christian history, we know which side of that divided story we should be on.

Some stories from the life of Jesus can help orient us in ways that challenge racism. The stories may be familiar, but the anti-racism dimensions of these stories have not always been recognized.

John 4:1-39 tells of a time Jesus travelled from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north of Palestine. This journey meant that he passed through Samaria. Since there was mutual antagonism between Jews and Samaritans, being in Samaria was itself a remarkable event. When they reached the village of Sychar, Jesus rested by the village well while the disciples went into town to buy food. Meanwhile, a village woman arrived at the well, and Jesus asked her for a drink. When they returned, the disciples were astounded that Jesus was speaking with a woman. No reason is given for this surprise. Some commentators have linked it to Leviticus 15.19-24. This text declares a menstruating woman ritually unclean, along with anything that she has touched, which would include the drinking vessel. In any case, Jesus interacted with a Samaritan who was a woman, and he accepted a drink from her jar. While there are many levels of meaning that can be developed from this story, the point I want to draw out here is that Jesus crossed hurtful boundaries of race, ethnicity, and gender, and treated the woman

with respect and as an equal. The response of the disciples makes clear the surprising nature of Jesus' actions.

Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) also contains a challenge to racism. The term "good Samaritan" has passed into our everyday language as merely a way to designate a really good or helpful person who does more than expected. But the parable has a much more profound message than that. In the run up to the parable, a lawyer had asked Jesus what he must do to be saved. And Jesus answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." But then the lawyer tried to test Jesus and make himself look good by asking, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered by telling the story that we call the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It was the Samaritan who aided the wounded man, while the Levite and priest walked by on the other side of the road. Remember, Samaritans and Jews did not get along. For the lawyer, it was the supposedly upstanding folks of society, the Levite and the priest, who passed the wounded traveler without assisting him. It is possible that they feared touching a wounded person, or perhaps a dead body would render them impure for ritual purposes. But the lawyer must have received something of a shock when, imagining himself as the wounded man in the ditch, he had to declare the Samaritan, the member of the supposed inferior and despised race, to be the good neighbor. A parallel today might have a beloved pastor and a school principal in the roles of Levite and priest, with an immigrant without legal papers playing the Samaritan.

Another story of particular interest concerns the interaction of Jesus with a gentile woman (Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30). She is frequently identified by Mark's designation of her as a Syrophoenician woman. As a gentile, she would have been one of the wealthy minority of foreigners living in territory occupied by the Romans. And like the Samaritans, she was outside the focus of the mission that Jesus gave the disciples. Jesus had gone north of Galilee into the area of Tyre and Sidon in Phoenecia,

where he hoped to remain incognito. However, the woman learned where he was staying. She came and pleaded for him to help her daughter, who was possessed by a demon. Jesus' initial response was to declare, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, Jesus' understanding of his mission did not include gentiles, such as this Syrophenician woman, and he dismissed her plea. But she got down on her knees and begged. Jesus replied sharply: "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Since dogs were scavengers and thus considered unclean, Jesus was rejecting her entreaty with what was arguably an insult. The woman was not deterred. She countered, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." Her retort clearly made an impression on Jesus. He changed his mind, and on the basis of her great faith, he promised that her daughter would be healed. This story is the only account in the Gospels where an interlocutor got the better of Jesus—and the person was both a woman and a gentile. It is a story of another boundary that Jesus confronted and crossed, this time between Jews and gentiles, as well as between women and men.

In the stories that deal with Samaritans, Jesus was including and raising the status of a despised ethnic group. The story of the gentile woman signaled another example of ethnic inclusion in the new people of God. These stories also raise the status of women.

Furthermore, all of these interactions of Jesus across ethnic and racial and gender boundaries underline that these distinctions do not divide people in the reign of God. All are welcome and included. Raised in the tradition of Judaism, Jesus was the bearer of the covenant between God and Israel. But with Jesus, it became clear that the God of Israel was the God of all peoples. In Jesus, Israel was reconstituted as a way of being that included all peoples. Paul's mission to the gentiles was to invite them into this covenant that now included everyone. Linking Jesus to the covenant with Abraham

means that the Jewish flesh of Jesus has universal implications, welcoming all into the people of God.

Two recent books are important to this discussion. One is *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* by Willie James Jennings. The other is *Race: A Theological Account*, by J. Kameron Carter. These authors argue that Christian theology went wrong when it separated Jesus from his Jewishness. We will say more about this separation in the next lesson. Here it is sufficient to say that Jennings and Carter believe that our theology should begin with the Jewishness of Jesus. Their understanding of his Jewishness includes his ethnicity, but is more than this. Pointing to Jesus' Jewishness locates him in a particular culture and a particular time and place, and this particularity should not be removed from theology. Rather, we learn from Jesus, who welcomed other ethnicities, that all are valuable and honored in the reign of God.

Additionally, recognizing the Jewishness of Jesus means recognizing the new theological identity that emerges when all are included. A "new family" is formed around Jesus. This is by no means a destruction of Israel, but a "rebirth" of Israel in Jesus. People of many languages and ethnicities now join together in worshiping the God who was witnessed to and made present in Jesus. The old cultural and ethnic identities do not disappear in the new identity. Rather, they are born anew in a community that honors and respects each and all of them. As Jennings says, people defined by their cultural differences "enfold the old cultural logics and practices inside the new ones of others, and they enfold the cultural logics and practices of others inside their own" (Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 273). The result is a "community seeking to love and honor [all] those in its midst" (*ibid.*, 274). None is superior, all are equal and exist within the new Israel, the new people of God.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) How would you characterize the description of Jesus' actions in this chapter?
Were there any surprises?
- 2) Is the description of Jesus' actions in this chapter different from your previous or current understanding? If so, how does it differ? Is the difference significant?
- 3) How do the stories in this lesson open you to learn from and appreciate members of other ethnic and cultural groups?
- 4) How can we welcome members of varying identities within the one people of God?
- 5) What questions do you have after reading this lesson?