

“What Do We Mean By ‘Human’?”

Matthew 15:10-28

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“10Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: 11it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”

12Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?”

13He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. 14Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” 15But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.”

16Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? 17Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? 18But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. 19For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. 20These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

21Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” 23But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” 24He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” 25But she

came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." 26He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." 27She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." 28Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly."

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

This, for me, is *the* most difficult passage in the Gospels to preach on. Plenty of theologians have done mental gymnastics to work around Jesus' treatment of this Canaanite woman so that Jesus comes out squeaky clean. But I don't buy it. Let's review: A Canaanite woman comes to Jesus seeking mercy for her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus responds by, first, completely ignoring her, then by talking past her to his disciples, saying "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel", then by calling her a *dog*.

And all of this happens, ironically, right after Jesus has just finished teaching people that it isn't what goes into the body that defiles a person, but rather *what comes out* - for our words are an outflow of our hearts.

I'm a firm believer that when I encounter something in Scripture like this that makes me uncomfortable, disturbed or angry, that's my cue, not to run away from or gloss over the discomfort, but instead to head straight towards it. So let's do this, friends. Let's walk straight into the mess.

What do we mean when we say that Jesus was fully God *and* fully human? In my experience, the Church has a pretty easy time with Jesus as fully God. Jesus is often imagined as a human,

yes, but somehow a sanitized human, miraculously outside his inculturated time and place, who had a downloaded brain straight from heaven that allowed him to live a life free of human fumbles, foibles, biases, and general messiness. And we do talk about Jesus' humanity in terms of the times he was hungry and thirsty, the times he needed to get away from the crowds to rest and connect with his Father, the time he was naughty and ran away from his parents at 12 years old to be in the temple. But what about the thorough humanness that is the biases and prejudices that are baked into our hearts and minds by the culture we were born into? Remember, he was *Jesus of Nazareth*. Jesus had a culture. He was formed by the traditions of his religious community and his family. He grew up with siblings and friends who played together and parroted what they heard their parents talking about at the dinner table. He learned from temple teachers about the Scriptures, teachers who you can bet were also human and also had their own slant when delivering the word of God to God's people, which to them was first and foremost the people of Israel, not outsiders like this Canaanite woman.

So, when we hear Jesus ignore, talk past, and then insult this Canaanite woman, a woman far outside the cultural lens he had been looking through during his 30 some years of life, we need to be deeply troubled. And - I also find here a word of comfort and solace for all of us who have biases, prejudices, and unexamined privileges that riddle us through and through. Because it sounds to me like, as a product of his time and place, Jesus had them too.

If you've joined us in reading "So You Want To Talk About Race?" by author and activist Ijeoma Olou, you've been hearing a

prophetic call to start seeing, acknowledging, unpacking, and dismantling the white supremacy that has infected all of us like a disease that finds its way into every system of the body. And so when I hear that Jesus was a *real* human, a human like me, the kind that grows up and soaks up the culture around them and parrots prejudiced ideas about other people even though they preach something else, I am hearing that Jesus has been where I am. Jesus has had the cringe-worthy realization that what's been baked in is not in fact the fullness of the good news he has been preaching. Jesus has had his worldview rocked by someone he has left out of his line of sight and his circle of influence. And perhaps Jesus has felt the weight of realizing that he has been wrong about something all this time.

And if Jesus is in *that* kind of mess with us, he is also the person who can show us the way forward when we feel so lost in our own inculturated biases that we can't seem to find our way home. Jesus had two choices when this woman challenged him after he ignored her, talked past her, and called her a dog. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table", the woman said. Theologian Debie Thomas reads an expansive moment of silence in this part of the text.¹ This woman has taken a theological statement that left her out and she has reimagined it, challenging Jesus to actually make good on the ministry he had been leading to this point. She is so convinced of God's power and of Jesus' own mission, that she knows even the tiniest crumb from *that* table is enough to heal and restore her daughter. And in that expansive silence, Jesus' field of vision is expanded, because this Canaanite woman's persistent, prophetic

¹ Debie Thomas, "Is It Good News Yet?" *Journey with Jesus: A Weekly Webzine for the Global Church, Since 2004*, posted August 9th, 2020, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>

voice made it so. She already knew what Jesus was learning in this moment, that the good news wasn't really good news until it included her, until it included her daughter, until it included every person like her who had been left out and excluded. Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly."

The Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney comments on this passage that, "We are at our best as human beings when we listen to and learn from someone who is so different from us that everything in our culture and raising tells us she is other."² Friends, Jesus - fully God and fully human - shows us how this is done. Jesus is not floating above our mess as a God who won't get Her hands dirty. Jesus is next to us in the trenches, human in every way we have been, human in all the ways that we wake up to the brokenness that gets baked into our culture's way of seeing other people who don't share our skin color, our ethnic background, our language, our citizenship status, our sexual orientation, our gender identity. And God with flesh on shows us what it means to let the prophetic voice of a person we have always thought of as other interrupt our way of being, what it means to let the old lens shatter on the ground so that these prophets in our midst can hand us a new lens that includes them. The Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney believes, and I do too, that it was this moment in the Gospel text when Jesus gained a new understanding of just how big the good news really is. It's bigger than his culture taught him. It's a love that shatters the boundaries he heard about at his family dinner table. It's a life-giving force that is more expansive than his temple teachers led him to believe. And I wonder if it's this encounter with the

² The Rev. Wil Gafney, Ph.D., "The Woman Who Changed Jesus," <https://www.wilgafney.com/tag/syrophoenician-woman/>

Canaanite woman that leads him to preach some of his final words in the Gospel: “Go therefore and make disciples of *all* nations...”

Friends, when the voice of the other speaks, will we listen? When the message of someone outside our own worldview pushes us out of our comfort zone, will we embrace the interruption and let ourselves be changed? Go to your bookshelf, your news sources, your list of podcasts, the circle of your closest friends this week. How many of the people in your circles of influence have a different skin color, ethnic background, sexual orientation, gender identity, or citizenship status than you do? Pastor Dexter and myself have been going through a sort of audit of the voices we listen to on a regular basis and we have found that most of the news we consume, the theology we read, and the shows we watch are produced by white people and center the concerns and perspectives of whiteness. And our social circles are the same. We have started widening our circle of influence to center media, books, and theology produced by and centering the stories of Black and indigenous people of color. We’ve created a list of those resources to share with you and we will send it out in our weekly church email on Monday. It’s also being shared in the chat function now. It’s the tip of the iceberg, but we hope it will help anyone looking for a place to start. We would love to be in conversation with you about the prophetic voices interrupting your life and what they are teaching you. We have a long way to go, friends, and we are on the journey together. And the good news is that Jesus has already gone before us to prepare the way. Amen.

Want to widen your field of vision to include voices who have been historically marginalized?

There are a lot of resources to connect to and your pastors wanted to share the voices that have become helpful to us as we work to widen our vision to include more diverse voices.

Here's a few ways to build that kind of listening and learning into your regular rhythm of life!

Listen:

- “Lady Don’t Take No” podcast with Black Lives Matter co-founder Alicia Garza: <https://lady-dont-take-no.simplecast.com/>
- 1619 podcast: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/1619/id1476928106>
- Codeswitch podcast: <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/510312/codeswitch>

Watch:

- “13th” Documentary on Netflix
- “The Next Question” online show with Austin Channing Brown, Chi Chi Okwu, and Jenny Booth Potter: <http://austinchanning.com/tnq>

Read:

- Subscribe (using this link) to the “Anti-Racism Daily” email list for daily learning and ant-racist actions: https://www.antiracismdaily.com/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=subscribe&utm_source=Anti-Racism+Daily&utm_campaign=ef1f803b13-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_7_14_2020_4_16_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_c1e01f2335-ef1f803b13-211675964
- *Hood Feminism* by Mikki Kendall
- *I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* by Austin Channing Brown
- *Are Prisons Obsolete?* by Angela Davis
- *How To Be An Anti-Racist* by Ibram X. Kendi

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