

**I Am**

**a Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Chapel Sermon based on Matthew 15:21-28**

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Fifty years ago this month (February 2018), 1,300 Black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tenn., went on strike. They went on strike in protest of unfair wages and unsafe working conditions. It was just a few days earlier, on Feb. 1, that two sanitation workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were killed after being crushed to death in the barrel of their garbage truck—a truck that had been reported faulty many times before, but ignored. The strike was not just about wages and working conditions, it was about human dignity. It was this strike that on March 18 brought Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to Memphis, where he marched and delivered a speech to 15,000 people. The plan was to come back to Memphis and march again with the workers and other organizers on April 5<sup>th</sup>. On April 4, he was assassinated by James Earl Ray.

Human dignity is something African-Americans have fought for ever since we were brought here on slave ships 400 years ago. We were brought, then bought and sold like chattel on the auction blocks. Time will not permit me to go through or elaborate the horrendous treatment my people went through, all for the sake of human dignity. For people like me, it's too easy to forget this history because it has either been redacted out of American history or because other things grab headlines day in and day out that further push the harsh realities of African-American history into the recesses of our minds. For those who do not look like me, it's too easy to not know about this history for similar reasons.

I remember hearing and reading about slavery growing up. But the pain of that history didn't pierce my spirit until in 2001, as a seminary student, I went to Ghana, West Africa, with a couple of professors, physicians, and other seminarians. While there, we visited a couple of slave castles. One was called Elmina and the other Cape Coast. At these sites we traveled through the dark and damp passages that led from the outside to the slave quarters and then out through the passage called "the point of no return." This was where they loaded the slaves, shackled one to another, onto the slave ships. You could feel the spirits of those who were shackled there for months, and you could still smell the foulness in the air, believe it or not.

But that wasn't what pierced my spirit. What pierced my spirit was what I saw above the door frame in the dining hall upstairs, where the overseers gathered, ate their meals, and even had prayer meetings. It was Scripture. I don't remember what text it was, but I do remember it was a passage from the Epistles. The reason that my spirit was pierced is because I was a licensed minister called to study the gospel of Jesus Christ as a seminary student, and what I learned standing in that place was that the men who were in that room centuries before I got there sat and read from the same Bible I was reading. They heard preaching from someone called, as I was, yet they felt comfortable participating in the inhumane treatment of men, women, and children right beneath them. I was struck by the role the Church played in this awful act of human trafficking, not just on the continent of Africa but also in this country. This was not the gospel I was familiar with, and it left me with a disdain for what I would later call the apathetic response of the faith community to human tragedy and neglect.

When I later read Dr. King's Letter from the Birmingham Jail, here in seminary, it appeared to me he was responding to this same apathetic response of the faith community to human tragedy and neglect. In reading the history of the Black Church, I gained an understanding of its value and the efficacy of its forming to resist the various types of oppression in this country, all designed to deprive African-

Americans of freedom and economic opportunity. As uncomfortable as it might be to hear, with few exceptions this country was founded on the domination of White men and the silence of White women. When White men were raping their female slaves and impregnating them, their wives were not unaware. Whether they were complicit in their silence or powerless to the control and influence of their husbands is debatable. But the conditions that have given rise to the #METOO movement did not just develop over the last few decades. They go back centuries. Feminist theologians such as Rosemary Reuther felt the need to offer theological responses to the silencing of women in biblical interpretation, and Womanist theologians such as Letty Russell, Delores Williams, Prathia Wynn Hall, and Katie Canon offered theological responses on behalf of women of color.

Using this background as a lens will enable us to read this text from Matthew 15 text. In it we see a woman, a Canaanite woman, resisting what culture would allow and expect and demanding to be heard and helped. There is no reason to take a polite tone in reading this text just because Jesus is the one she is talking to. Her child was in distress and, as a mother would do, she demanded help. She knew she wasn't a dog, but she also knew that dogs would get better treatment than what she was currently getting. The mother of 14-year old Emmitt Till was demanding to be heard when the body of her son was transported back to Chicago after a gang of White men brutally murdered him in Mississippi while he was visiting his grandmother. She demanded justice and wanted the world to see what happened to her son.

It boils down to human dignity. When the Black Lives Matter movement began after the death of Travon Martin, Michael Brown, Philando Castille, Sandra Bland, Walter Scott, and others, it was immediately met with the counter narratives Blue Lives Matter and All Lives Matter downplaying the value and dignity of African-American lives. The roadside beating of Rodney King in 1992 by L.A. police did very little to call into question the abuse of African-Americans at the hands of police. As I think about King's Letter from the Birmingham Jail, I wonder how that letter would read today. I wonder what it would say, and who would write it? I wonder when the Church of today will respond to this. How much longer will White Supremacy and White nationalism go unchecked? Just as the slave traders sat comfortably in the dining hall/prayer room in their piety, we would be foolish not to think that there are some like these individuals sitting in the sanctuaries and basements of their churches.

But Psalm 139 reminds me that despite how others see me, God knows my worth. Despite how others might value or devalue me, God knows my potential. God knows my frame. God knows the very hairs on my head. God knows my down-sitting and my up-rising. I am created by God. I am loved by God. I am because God is, and hopefully this Psalm serves as a reminder to you that you are also of value—no more and no less than I am. For Christ died so that we *all* might live.