

Would Jesus Discriminate?

THE 21ST CENTURY QUESTION

**Lenten Journeys of Faith:
Would Jesus Discriminate?
Would We?**

A five week study written for MCC

by

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LENTEN JOURNEYS OF FAITH: WOULD JESUS DISCRIMINATE? WOULD WE?

Would Jesus discriminate? Before we can ask this question of the larger world, we need to ask this question in the confines of our own hearts and in the inner workings of our congregations. Lent is a time of self-examination and transformation. In this holy season we will spend time examining the ways we discriminate -- not to point fingers in judgment or to be more politically correct but to bring those places of discrimination in us and in our churches to Christ's healing presence.

This five-week study will use the lectionary readings for the Sundays in Lent (except for week two) as well as modern day stories to explore the topics of discrimination, privilege, entitlement, oppression, hierarchy, domination, and power. Within the exploration of these topics, specific kinds of discrimination / 'isms' (e.g. sexism, classism, racism) will be considered in the group discussion.

Each week we will also suggest a Lenten practice that goes with the study.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Week one: Discrimination

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11, Jesus' Temptation in the Wilderness

Week two: Privilege/Entitlement

Scripture: Mark 7:24-40, The Faith of the Syrophenician Woman

Week three: Oppression

Scripture: John 4:5-42, The Story of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

Week four: Hierarchy/Domination

Scripture: John 9:1-41 Jesus' Healing of the Blind Man

Week five: Power

Scripture: John 11:1-5 The Raising of Lazarus

LEADER GUIDE FOR LENTEN GROUPS

The following is a suggested flow and time frame for the evening. Each session is anticipated to be no less than 60 minutes to no more than 90 minutes in length. The full text for readings is provided with each weekly session. Leaders should encourage people to bring a journal, drawing pad, tablet, pen or pencil or crayons with them each week. Leaders may want to have extras of these for people who forget. Leaders will also want to create a welcoming space for participants with chairs set in a circle, an altar with a candle and sacred objects on it, soft music playing as people arrive, etc.

Arrival – 15 min. (room set up, altar, materials)

Welcome – 5 min. (light candle, opening prayer, read key verse from Bible story)

Ground rules, recap of previous week – 10 min.

Study – 10 min. (Summary and commentary on the Biblical story based on the issues for the evening; sharing of a contemporary story or example)

Questions for discussion – 25 min. (Sharing with question/s from the story, and personal experience — stories, personal, congregational, denominational...)

Suggestions for weekly Lenten practices – 5 min.

Closing Prayer – 5 min.

SUGGESTED GROUND RULES

The purpose of these groups is to provide an opportunity for honest dialogue about the ways our “isms” keep us divided. When we share our stories, understanding and healing can occur. Therefore, it is important to create a safe space within the study groups for people to share their own stories. The following are suggested ground rules for creating such a space. You will briefly review ground rules each week so you may wish to have your final list printed in some fashion for easy reference and review.

1. We commit to honor confidentiality.
2. We agree to avoid side conversations or comments and keep this a safe environment for each to express individual thoughts, feelings, and opinions.
3. We agree to listen actively, be supportive, and focus on each other’s responses.
4. We commit to ask another’s permission before commenting on his/her sharing with the group.
5. We agree to keep our answers brief and allow all the opportunity to share.
6. We agree to remember the following as we dialogue:

It's OK to disagree. Our conversation is not about bringing people to the "correct" point of view but about encouraging all to express their viewpoints respectfully and listen to others' respectfully.

It's not OK to shame or blame oneself or others. The goal is to exchange ideas with each of us taking responsibility for our own viewpoints without attacking ourselves or others.

We will practice "both /and thinking." This type of thinking acknowledges that when multiple viewpoints are presented, it is possible that more than one point of view may hold truth. (This is the opposite of "either/or thinking" which holds that only one answer can ultimately be correct, and thus, by definition all other answers are wrong.)

We will be aware of intent/impact statements. When expressing an idea, we will be aware of the intent behind what we are expressing and mindful of the potential impact on others.

We will "try on" ideas with which we are unfamiliar or even initially disagree.

We will practice self-focus, using "I" statements rather than "we" or "you" statements.

NOTE: After reviewing these suggested ground rules, ask if there are any others that individuals in your group would add in order to create a safe and welcoming environment for their sharing.

CONSIDER DIFFERENT KINDS OF DISCRIMINATION

Throughout the study, readings and prayers include the writings and voices of different peoples. During sharing and brainstorming the group may identify a wide variety of forms of discrimination. If the following do not arise during group sharing, as group leader, consider opportunities to name or offer examples of these (and other) kinds of discrimination:

- Classism
 - Racism
 - Heterosexism (also consider GLBTQ people discriminating against straight people)
 - Ageism (i.e., discrimination based upon someone being older or younger)
 - Ablism (i.e., discrimination based upon differing physical or mental abilities)
 - Trans discrimination
 - Couplism (i.e., favoring couples over single people other relational forms)
 - S/M discrimination (may include discrimination based upon leather identities)
- * See "Leader Guide" for suggested set-up, flow and timing for use each week.

WEEK ONE: DISCRIMINATION

Matthew 4:1-11 Jesus' Temptation in the Wilderness

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, "One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you,'

and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put your Sovereign God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ^{and} the devil said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

'Worship the Lord your God,

and serve God alone.'"

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Key verses: (1-3a) "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came to him and said"

Summary and Commentary:

This story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is always featured in the Lectionary on the first Sunday in Lent. A similar version of this story is also found in Luke 4:1-13. The event occurs in Jesus' life right after his baptism in the Jordan. Immediately after his baptism, he is "led by the Spirit into the wilderness."

The reference to the wilderness and the 40 days recalls the story of Israel's wilderness wanderings for 40 years and the 40 days Moses spends on Mt. Sinai to receive the Commandments. Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness is the model for the Christian journey of Lent. During this 40-day period, like Jesus, many of us will fast. We will spend time in self-examination and reflection. We will struggle with temptation. New Testament scholar, Fred Craddock, indicates that temptation shows strength not weakness: "It is usually the obedient and not the disobedient who are struggling, being opposed and tested."

This story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is similar to what tribal cultures call a "vision quest" or "walk about." People in these cultures fast and pray to prepare themselves for an intense journey in which they discover their life's purpose. The nature of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness: stones to bread, jumping off the pinnacle of the temple, worshipping something other than God—all of

these will shape and define his “life’s purpose,” his ministry. A ministry dependent on the word and will of God and not contingent on his own power.

Our denomination will turn 40 years old this year. The biblical number 40 indicates “completeness” or “the passing of a generation.” In our 40th year, we are being led by the Spirit into the wilderness to re-discover our “life’s purpose” to refocus the specific contours of our ministry as we have experienced a “passing of a generation of leadership” in our denomination. That wilderness time involves looking deeply within and continuing to work on the ways we perpetuate in our churches the very attitudes and behaviors against which we preach so passionately. Attitudes and behaviors such as sexism and racism, classism and ablism.

Modern Story:

In December of 2007 a new team was called into existence in MCC to help facilitate theological discussions and theological work in our denomination. At a team meeting during a brainstorming session, the “Would Jesus Discriminate” campaign came up. As discussion continued, it became apparent that people from different race and class backgrounds may ask or hear the question, “Would Jesus discriminate?” differently. One member of the team pointed out that we in MCC need to be careful not to assume a place of privilege in our work for equality. We need to be aware of how we speak from places of privilege about liberation.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How would you define the word “discriminate?”
2. Let’s brainstorm a list of different kinds of discrimination we have experienced or seen. (Create written list. Also see Leaders’ Guide for suggestions.)
3. Tell about a time in your life when you have experienced discrimination.
4. How do you hear the question, “Would Jesus discriminate?” What feelings or thoughts arise when you hear that question asked?

Suggested Practice for the Week:

Spend time in prayer every day this week imagining that you have gone with Jesus into the wilderness on a “vision quest.” How will you prepare for this forty-day journey? What will be your temptations? Write your prayerful answers to these questions in a journal that you will keep for this five-week study.

Closing Prayer:

Create in me a clean heart, O Gracious One,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Enfold me in the arms of love, and
fill me with your Holy Spirit.
Restore in me the joy of your saving grace,

and encourage me with a new spirit.
Then I will teach others your ways,
and prisoners of fear will return to You.
Deliver me from the addictions of society, most Gracious One,
O keep me from temptation that
I may tell of your justice and mercy.

--"Psalm 51," from *Psalms for Praying* by Nan C. Merrill

WEEK TWO: PRIVILEGE/ENTITLEMENT

Summary of Last Week:

Last week we looked at a story from the life of Jesus in which he fasted and prayed for 40 days and nights in order to prepare himself for his public ministry. We shared definitions of the term “discrimination” and asked ourselves if there were events from the life of Jesus that would help us with our own discriminatory attitudes and behaviors. We also indicated that people of different races and classes may approach the question, “Would Jesus discriminate?” in different ways. This week we will take a look at a unique story from the gospels that highlights a time in Jesus’ life when he does seem to discriminate. As you discuss the story of the Syrophonecian Woman in week two of our study, be aware of how you defined discrimination in week one and see if this story changes your definition in any way.

Mark 7:24-40

The Faith of the Syrophonecian Woman

Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet, he could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." "Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." She went home and found her child lying on the bed and the demon gone.

The Healing of a Deaf and Mute Man

Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man. After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means, "Be opened!"). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

Key Verses: “(Jesus) looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, ‘Ephphatha!’ (which means, ‘Be opened!’). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly.”

Modern reading:

Oriah Mountain Dreamer, Indian Elder

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living.
I want to know what you ache for
and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.
It doesn't interest me how old you are.

I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love,
 for your dreams, for the adventure of being alive.
 It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon.
 I want to know if you have touched the center of your own sorrow,
 if you have been opened by life's betrayals
 or have become shriveled and closed from fear of further pain!
 I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own,
 without moving to hide it or fade it or fix it.
 I want to know if you can be with JOY, mine or your own;
 if you can dance with wildness and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of
 your fingers and toes without cautioning yourself to be careful, to be realistic,
 or to remember the limitations of being a human.
 It doesn't interest me if the story you're telling me is true.
 I want to know if you can disappoint another to be true to yourself;
 if you can bear the accusation of betrayal and not betray your own soul.
 I want to know if you can be faithful and therefore be trustworthy.
 I want to know if you can see beauty even when it is not pretty every day,
 and if you can source your life from ITS presence.
 I want to know if you can live with failure, yours and mine,
 and still stand on the edge of a lake
 and shout to the silver of the full moon,
 "YES!"
 It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have.
 I want to know if you can get up after the night of grief and despair,
 weary and bruised to the bone, and do what needs to be done for the children.
 It doesn't interest me who you are, how you came to be here.
 I want to know if you will stand in the center of the fire with me and not shrink back.
 It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied.
 I want to know what sustains you from the inside when all else falls away.
 I want to know if you can be alone with yourself,
 and if you truly like the company you keep in the empty moments.

Summary and Commentary:

Jesus was approached by a Greek woman, and she asked him to heal her daughter. Jesus responded with a typical reaction from his culture. "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." His response was abrupt, degrading, and dismissive, yet that did not discourage her. Instead, the Syrophenician woman's response revealed to Jesus his own cultural bias and prejudice against people whom he, as a Jew, felt unworthy of God's love. She promptly answered, "Yes, Teacher, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." In that moment, Jesus seemed to realize the prejudice of his actions and humbly told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." The Syrophenician woman went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

It was common practice in Jesus' day to refer to Gentile as "dogs." His attitudes towards Gentiles had been culturally and religiously taught. He would not have identified that as prejudice nor would have anyone else in Judaism. Gentiles did not follow Judaic purity laws and were therefore considered

as unclean as “dogs” and other animals. There are few places in the Gospels where we experience the humanity of Jesus in this way since most stories focus on the divinity rather than the humanity of Jesus.

In the next story recorded in Mark’s gospel, Jesus is presented with another Gentile in need of healing. Immediately, he took the man away from the crowd, put his fingers in the man’s ears, spit on his tongue, and said, “Ephphatha!” which means, “Be opened!” Although Greek was the common language of the day, Jesus uses here the Aramaic word, “Ephphatha!” It is unclear why he removed the man from the crowd and spoke in Aramaic, but it is very clear that he did not hesitate to touch and heal the man even though he was considered “unclean” because he was a Gentile.

If we follow Jesus’ ministry his understanding of unconditional love grows to include, Gentiles, women, children, lepers, and numerous other marginalized people he had been initially taught to ignore and even ostracize. By the end of his ministry, he could have easily been asking the questions reflected in the poem by Oriah Mountain Dreamer, an Indian Elder.

Questions for Discussion:

1. The Syrophenician woman revealed to Jesus his own cultural bias and prejudice against people whom he as a Jew felt were less worthy in the sight of God. His attitudes towards Gentiles were culturally and religiously taught. From her desperate desire to have her daughter cured, she found the courage to challenge his initial dismissal, and not only was her daughter healed but Jesus also began to experience a personal healing.

Prejudices, biases, elitism, power and privilege, family dynamics, social values, religious teachings, labels, economics, classism, heterosexism, ageism, couplism, and issues of status influence our opinions of ourselves and others and often keep us from loving our neighbors and ourselves. Has there ever been a time in your life where you needed something so much that you embodied the courage of the Syrophenician woman? If so, share it.

2. All of us grow up with prejudices and biases towards other people, and most of these views come from a lack of understanding and fear of difference. If Jesus were to put his fingers in your ears and say, “Ephphatha – Be Open,” to what would he be asking you to be open? Have you? Can you? Will you?
3. How would you answer Jesus if he were asking you the questions from Oriah Mountain Dreamer’s poem: “I want to know what sustains you from the inside when all else falls away? I want to know if you can be alone with yourself, and if you truly like the company you keep in the empty moments?” As a committed Christian, what does it mean to you to “stand in the center of the fire with me and not shrink back?”
4. We see violence rise up from prejudice, biases, elitism, power and privilege, family dynamics, social values, religious teachings, labels, economics, classism, heterosexism, ageism, couplism, and issues of status. What can we do to stop such violence in our hearts? In our backyards? In this greater religious community we name “Christianity?” In a world rent by war and civil strife?

Suggested Practice for the Week:

1. Notice places in your life where prejudices and biases influence people’s opinions of each other, e.g., the newspaper, radio and television advertisements, billboards, you tube, the Internet, and the Bible.

How could things be different?

Journal your thoughts—written, drawn, or otherwise imagined and communicated —from your own imagination, articles and other experiences you have had.

2. Pray the following as a breath prayer throughout the week. (on the “in” breath speak a phrase, on the “out” breath complete the phrase):

“Ephphatha – May my heart and mind be open!”

Closing Prayer

Prayer for Revolutionary Love By Denise Levertov

That a woman not ask a man to leave meaningful work
to follow her.

That a man not ask a woman to leave meaningful work
to follow him.

That no one try to put Eros in bondage.
But that no one put a cudgel [club] in the hands of Eros.

That our loyalty to one another and our loyalty to our work
not be set in false conflict.

That our love for each other give us love for each other’s work.
That our love for each other’s work give us love for one another.

*That our love for each other’s work give us love for one another.
That our love for each other give us love for each other’s work.*

That our love for each other, if need be,
give way to absence. And the unknown.

That we endure absence, if need be,
without losing our love for each other.
Without closing the doors to the unknown.

WEEK 3: OPPRESSION

Summary of last week:

In the story of Jesus encounter with the Syrophonecian Woman from last week we observed the ways bias and prejudice against people are often culturally and religiously taught. In the words and challenge of the Syrophonecian Woman to Jesus we witnessed how a person's intense desire for healing can confront discrimination and even bring healing and change. That healing continued when the ears of a deaf mute were opened by Jesus. You were invited to make the words of Jesus a prayer for your own life this week: "Ephphatha—May my heart and mind be Open." Begin praying that prayer now as you prepare to be opened in this third week of our study.

John 4:5-42 Jesus meets and speaks with a Samaritan woman.

(Jesus) came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband;' for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the God neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship God in spirit and truth, for God seeks such as these to worship. God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her

water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him. Meanwhile, the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete that one's work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.'" Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony: "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."

Key Verses: "Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?' Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?'"

Summary and Commentary:

This familiar story of Jesus speaking with the Samaritan woman at the well is extraordinary on many counts. It is one of the longest and most detailed theological conversations found in the Gospels. Jesus holds this extended conversation with an unnamed but memorable woman: a woman who does not shrink from discussing their theological differences, a woman who, ultimately, becomes one of the first "evangelists" of the Bible. Taking place in a setting laden with oppressive dynamics makes this intimate, transformative conversation even more noteworthy.

Oppression-- the exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner; the feeling of being heavily burdened, mentally or physically, by troubles, adverse conditions, anxiety, etc.

At least 2 oppressive dynamics can be noticed in the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman:

1. *The adversarial relationship between Jews and Samaritans.* Jews and Samaritans did not associate based upon religious differences (as Jesus and the woman discuss) and animosity built upon long-standing class and racial/ethnic differences. As outsiders in Samaria, the Jewish-identified Jesus and disciples would have been unwelcome, but they still would have had greater privilege and autonomy than Samaritans in ancient Palestine.
2. *The roles of men and women prescribed by sexism in the ancient Near East.* Not only does Jesus exhibit his male privilege in instructing an unknown woman to serve him, but any man speaking with an unrelated woman in public was very unusual, if not alarming, as the disciples' response illustrates. Both the motives of the man and the virtue of the woman would have been in serious question.

It is interesting to notice that the fact the Samaritan woman had multiple husbands and was unmarried to her current partner is noted by Jesus without further comment. Any moral judgment upon her relational history or status must be imported from *other* sources – it is *not* to be found in Jesus' conversation with her.

Modern story: Rev. Elder Freda Smith speaks to the 1973 MCC General Conference. From *Don't be Afraid Anymore* by Troy D. Perry and Thomas Swicegood (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990): pp. 114-116.

"Our Fellowship bylaws were originally written by men and for men, because women clergy were not only a rarity in the general population, they were nonexistent in our denomination, which, even if unintentionally, was overwhelmingly male oriented in the early, conceptual days of our church. Therefore, without intending to exclude women in any aspect of Metropolitan Community Church, neither did we specifically include them in our bylaws when we wrote generic words like *he, him* and *his* but never specific words like *she, her* and *hers*, although we were actually licensing both men and women.

(When Freda Smith) came before (the 1973 General Conference) wanting changes . . . (she) received our permission to speak.

'I want to call your attention to the fact that I am the only woman here,' began Freda, 'and I do not believe MCC was called to have all male preachers. I happen to have a strong opinion that an important part of MCC's ministry will be to have women in the clergy.'

'This is the year of rewriting our bylaws,' said Freda in Atlanta. 'While we have been struggling to write a statement of faith, to acknowledge creeds our religion is based on and a number of other things, perhaps some of you have noticed that the language in our bylaws is all male, especially in reference to ministers. Always it reads 'the minister, *he...*' and 'the deacon *he...*' and 'the exhorter, *he . . .*' Women are always left out! I want it changed.

Not everyone approved.

Freda would not be deterred.

'If the bylaws mean *she*, then the bylaws should say *she*,' insisted Freda. 'If *she* is really what you mean, then say *she*! Don't tell me that *he* is sufficient, because the few of us women who are present today tell you it isn't! We don't want to be "understood" as an equal part of the church. We want to be *named* as an equal part! We want to know these papers definitely mean us.'

Several minutes later, Freda wanted to make a motion that our bylaws be completely changed. In every place where the word *he* existed, she asked that the reference automatically be changed to read '*he and she*.' A blanket change of wording was not the way that particular type of business could be accomplished. For technical, legalistic reasons that could not be ignored, the wording of our bylaws could only be changed on an individual line-by-line basis, and every change required a separate motion and a vote.

'So, during the conference,' recalls Freda, 'as we went through the bylaws, at every line where the word *he* was used, I stood, was recognized by Reverend Perry, and made a motion to substitute the words *he and she*. After every one of my motions, there had to be discussion and a vote. It was a very slow process, and I know people got tired of me doing it, but I persisted, and I stood and made my motion for a change on every line of the bylaws.'"

Discussion Questions:

1. One of the most powerful indicators of oppression/freedom is the power of speech. The transformative power of public and/or private speech is evident in these 2 stories. In the Biblical and modern stories, how do the women acknowledge, resist or utilize systems in place to move from oppression toward greater freedom?
2. Tell about a time when you experienced or observed someone “speaking out” when convention would have expected her/him to remain silent. What happened? What was the result?

Suggested Practice for the Week: Identify an issue of importance to you about which you have been silent. This week, have a conversation, set up a meeting, or write a letter/e-mail to someone “in power” about it.

Closing prayer:

Wondrous God, lover of lion and lizard, cedar and cactus, raindrop and river, we praise You for the splendor of the world! We thank You, that woven throughout the tapestry of earth are the varied threads of human diversity. Created in Your image, we are of many colors and cultures, ages and classes, gender and sexual identities. Different and alike, we are Your beloved people. Free us, we pray, from fears of difference that divide and wound us. Move us to dismantle our attitudes and systems of prejudice. Renew our commitment to make this a household of faith for all people –gay, bisexual, lesbian, transgender, and straight—that all who worship and minister here may know the grace and challenge of faith. In our life together, grant us minds and hearts eager to learn, reluctant to judge, and responsive to the leading of Your loving Spirit. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

“Wondrous God” by Rev. Ann B. Day, Program Coordinator, Open and Affirming Program of the United Church of Christ Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns 1987-2007. Originally published in Shaping Sanctuary.

WEEK FOUR: HEIRARCHY/DOMINATION

Summary of last week:

In the story of Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan Woman at the well we saw how discrimination and oppression is often interlocking in nature. In this story 'interlocking' discriminatory attitudes with regard to race, religion, gender, and marital status were operative. In this biblical story as well as the story of Freda Smith's fight for inclusive language in MCC we witnessed the power of speech to either oppress or liberate. Our focus this week will be to take a look at the ways in which people are judged based on their physical and/or mental abilities.

John 9:1-41 Jesus Heals a Man Born Blind

As Jesus went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. As long as it is day, we must do the work of the one who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

Having said this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means 'Sent'). So the man went and washed and came home seeing.

His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" Some claimed that he was.

Others said, "No, he only looks like him."

But he himself insisted, "I am the man."

"How then were your eyes opened?" they demanded.

He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see."

"Where is this man?" they asked him.

"I don't know," he said.

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. Therefore, the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see."

Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others asked, "How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?" So they were divided. Finally, they turned again to the blind man and asked, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened." The man replied, "He is a prophet."

The Jews still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents. "Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?"

"We know he is our son," the parents answered, "and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue. That was why his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God," they said. "We know this man is a sinner."

He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?"

Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."

The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly who do God's will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.

Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Humanity?"

"Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe."

Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you."

Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him.

Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind."

Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, "What? Are we blind too?"

Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains."

Key Verse: "The blind man replied to the Pharisees, 'Whether Jesus is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!'"

Modern Story: Johnny's Challenge (Adapted from Beliefnet.com)

Barbara Glanz was hired by a supermarket chain to help them with customer loyalty. She challenged them to make a difference and create memories for their customers. A young man with Down's syndrome named Johnny was a bagger at the supermarket and wanted to make a difference to customers but struggled with how he could make an impact since he was only a grocery bagger. Johnny decided each night he would look up an inspirational quote, write it down on several strips of paper, and then put a quote in each person's bag he packed the next day. He did this every day and the customers loved it.

One day the store manager saw one of the checkout lines was several people deep, so he opened up more checkout lanes, but none of the customers would leave the line where Johnny was bagging—they all had come there to get their inspirational quote of the day. One woman stopped the manager and said, "I used to come here once a week, but now I try to shop here everyday to get my inspirational quote from Johnny."

And, it didn't stop there; "Johnny's challenge" inspired other departments in the store to behave in similar fashion. The florist, who in the past would throw away flowers that lost a petal or two and

were unsellable, decided instead to give them away by pinning these flowers onto elderly women or young girls who happened to be in the store.

A few months later the store manager called again and said Johnny had transformed the store: “Our customers are talking about us ... they’re coming back and bringing their friends. A wonderful spirit of service is spreading throughout the entire store... and all because Johnny chose to make a difference.”

Summary and Commentary

Jesus and his disciples traveled together on the day of the Sabbath when they saw a man blind from birth and asked, “Who sinned: this man or his parents?” Jesus responded by saying his blindness had nothing to do with sin and that he was just born blind. Jesus went on to say that the healing of this man’s blindness would display the work of God in his life. (Having a personal relationship with God was not even a consideration for religious people in antiquity.) As Jesus continued to teach his disciples, he spit on some dirt to make some mud, put it on the man’s eyes and then sent him to the Pool of Siloam to wash his face. The man followed the instructions of Jesus: he washed his face and was healed of his blindness.

Soon after the healing, the Pharisees heard of this miracle and questioned the man and his parents. The laws for the Sabbath were very clear: one does not work that day, period. It was unconscionable for the Pharisees to accept the fact that this man who was performing these miracles was actually the Messiah because he was violating a sacred law. Healing someone on the Sabbath was work, and it was against the laws of Moses to do any work on this holy day.

This story is as much about physical blindness as spiritual blindness. It mattered very little to the Pharisees that this man, blind since birth, could now see and that his healing would allow his community to touch God, who cared about people in such a personal way. They were fixated on the fact that he had broken a religious law and not on the lesson that to give sight to someone who longed to see the world and to move in his world with a greater sense of freedom and belonging was a gift from God. This man’s healing challenged their understanding of how God moves in hearts and lives.

In the modern story, Johnny was a young man with Down’s Syndrome. He had limits to his physical and mental abilities. Like the blind man, he was judged based on his limitations, not on his contributions. And, like the blind man, Johnny experienced healing, but Johnny’s healing came in a different form. He was not healed of his physical limitations; instead, he healed others of their prejudice towards someone who was differently-abled.

In both stories, the man born blind and Johnny had major roles in their own healing. Jesus could have healed the blind man by simply telling him he was healed. Instead, Jesus told the man that he had to go to the Pool of Siloam and wash. Similarly, Johnny had to think about something *he* could do to make a difference. Thus something was required of each man. Each had to be active participants in his healing process, and while both men were changed by their healings, in each instance, the greater healing came for the community. The man blind from birth was known to his community as the blind

beggar, and Johnny was known as an other-abled challenged young man. Additionally, their healings were not private but public, and from their healings came healing for the greater community.

Questions for Discussion:

1. People are often judged by their physical and/or mental abilities. Has there been a time in your life where your abilities were misjudged? Has there been a time when you met someone whose abilities you misjudged? If you could “do over” that moment in time so that it might become a time of personal and communal healing, what would you do differently?

2. The blind man replied to the Pharisees, "Whether Jesus is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" Has there been a time in your life when your eyes were opened to something you had not been able to see before, but, once having “seen” it, you felt healed or made whole? Briefly share your story.

3. In both stories, those of the man born blind and of Johnny, each individual had a significant role in his own healing. Jesus told the man he had to go to the Pool of Siloam and wash, and Johnny had to think about something he could do to make a difference. Is there a healing for which you long? Can you identify what will you need to do to participate in this healing? Can you imagine any healing for the greater community that may come from such participation and healing? In other words, how can you participate in self-healing that engages and re-images a community that is also healed and made whole by your words and/or actions?

4. Can you imagine yourself in the place of the Pharisees or Johnny’s co-workers—individuals who initially (or maybe never) were able to accept that unexpected good or unexplained healing could come out of a situation that others judged immoral or pathetic? As an LGBTQS individual, can you imagine a way to engage those with eyes and hearts of Pharisees to “see” differently and, in so doing, to put themselves in what theologian Carter Heyward calls “right relation” with LGBTQS folks, themselves, and God?

Suggested Practice for the Week:

1. Take on the “Johnny challenge.” Think of something you can do to make a difference in the world you touch and do it through the Lenten and Easter seasons. Keep a journal—written, drawn, or otherwise imagined and communicated—of your thoughts and experiences of how your self-healing helped make whole your larger community.

2. Breath prayer (on the “in” breath speak a phrase, on the “out” breath complete the phrase): “I once was blind, but now I see—may my healing heal the world.” Amen

Closing Prayer:

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, “Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous?” Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

By Marianne Williamson from *A Return To Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles*.

WEEK 5: POWER

Summary of last week:

Both stories in our study last week provided examples of the ways people participate in their own healing when confronting oppressive systems and structures. The blind man that Jesus healed had to go and wash in the pool of Siloam and even though in our modern story Johnny was not physically healed of his cerebral palsy, his actions helped to heal the prejudice in his community. Our story—the raising of Lazarus from the dead— for the last week of this Lenten study will invite us to consider tangible ways we can continue to ‘unbind’ one another from the isms that keep us less than free.

John 11:1-50 Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Teacher, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake, I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." When she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "If you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Teacher, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Teacher, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone, and Jesus looked upward and said, "God, I thank you for having heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what he had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."

Key verse: "When (Jesus) had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'"

Summary and Commentary:

This well-known story is the final and greatest miracle of Jesus found in the series of miracles (or "signs") recounted in the Gospel of John. In conjunction with the many "I am" statements of Jesus in John, these signs help demonstrate Jesus' intimate relationship and shared divine nature with the ultimate power/authority of the universe—God. This story also addresses many of the concerns of the early Christian movement, in particular, anxieties about the delay of Jesus' promised return and the spiritual state of Christians who had died before the expected return. This story also contains several memorable moments: the shortest verse in the Bible: "Jesus wept" (vs. 35); and two of the most stirring commands of Jesus: "Lazarus, come out!" and "Unbind him and let him go."

Among many possible approaches to reading this story, it is illuminating to read the story of the raising of Lazarus as a symbolic story about power.

Power— the ability to do or to act; the capability of doing or accomplishing something.

Can anyone be less powerful (i.e., less able to do or act) than someone dead? Can anyone be more powerful than one who can restore life to the dead? This great power of Jesus certainly seems to be a motivation for the genuine concern of the religious authorities in ancient Palestine.

Questions for Discussion:

1. As someone reads the Biblical passage aloud, choose one character with whom to identify.

Suggested characters:

A sister of Lazarus: Mary or Martha
One of the disciples of Jesus
Jesus
A mourner
Lazarus
One of the Pharisees
Caiaphas, the high priest

As you hear the story, imagine entering into the scene as this person. As the story unfolds, how do you emotionally, physically? What questions come to your mind? When do you feel least powerful? Most powerful? Why?

At the conclusion of the reading, share any new insights or challenges that arose for you. (Depending upon group size, sharing may be with a partner or with the full group.)

2. Read the poem, "My Mother Said," found below. (It may be read aloud to the group). As this poem is read, who do you feel is "bound" or "free?" What are the sources of "power?" For whom? How is the power the same or different?

My mother said, "She is beautiful," grasping
My small hand.
But I said, "How can you say that,
When she just kicked back at you
As you tried to board the bus?"

And my mother said, "But she is beautiful," as I pulled
Up bobby socks.
And I said, "How can you say that,
When the bus driver won't let you
Sit where you want?"

Still my mother said, "They are beautiful," as I wrote
Applications.
And I said, "How can you say that,
When they won't take my application
To go to their college?"

Then my mother said, "Yes, beautiful," as I trudged to work.
And I said, "How can you say that,
When I must pay poll tax for the right to vote,

And they follow me around the store as if I planned to steal,
And call me by my first name when I pull out my
Credit card,
And give me sloppy service even at fine hotels,
And promote that dumb white man over me
Even though I have more time, and experience,
And great evaluations?"

My mother said, "We are all beautiful," from her place
Beneath the lilac tree,
"Created in God's image!"
And I said, "How can you say that,
When I just got stopped by police, only
Because I was driving my nice new sports car?"

And she smiled and said,
"Created in God's image. Someday they'll know."
And I said,

"Dear Lord, how long...?"

By Byrdie C. Lee, from *Race and Prayer*, edited by Malcolm Boyd and Chester Talton
(Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2003): pp. 39-40.

Suggested Practice for the Week:

Identify a person or persons in your community you feel are less powerful than you are. This week,
pray:

- A) to hear the voice of Jesus speaking "come out" to them
- AND/OR
- B) to discern a way for you to help "unbind" them

Closing Prayer:

"Fear is the greatest immobilizer in the word. When we are afraid, we are reluctant to take risks
because we think that we will be punished for our mistakes. This is true spiritually as it is in other
dimensions of our lives.

There are many kinds of fear, but mostly we fear rejection. Sometimes we are so afraid of
rejection that . . . we keep the love offered to us safely hidden away where it will never require us to
make ourselves vulnerable by risking a response to it.

There is only one antidote to this kind of fear, and that is love."

(From *The Road to Emmaus* by Joseph W. Houle.)