Proper 15A
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August 16, 2020

The Game Is Fixed

During the wave of protests in the aftermath of George Floyd's killing, one woman's video went viral as she spoke poignantly to the painful truth of racial injustice and oppression. Author and screenwriter, Kimberly Latrice Jones, was out filming the civil unrest when she explained why people are looting by comparing the board game Monopoly to the uphill economic battle many African Americans face today. "We never get that economics was the reason that black people were brought to this country, they came to do agricultural work in the south and textile work in north," Jones explains. "Now, if you wanted to play Monopoly and for four hundred rounds you have to play on behalf of the person that you're playing against, you have to earn wealth for them and then you have to turn it over to them."

"And then for 50 years you finally get a little bit and you're allowed to play, but any time they don't like the way that you're playing or you're catching up or that you're doing something to be self-sufficient, they burn your game, burn your cars and burn your Monopoly money," she said, addressing Tulsa and Rosewood two thriving African American towns from the early 20th century that were decimated. "At this point the only way you're going to catch up in the game is if the person shares the wealth, and now what if every time they share the wealth, they say, 'Oh, you're an equal opportunity hire'. How can you win? You can't win, the game is fixed! So, when they say 'why did you burn down your own neighborhood? Why did you burn down the community? It's not ours," she screamed. "We don't own anything!"

When I first saw Jones' video, it was so difficult to watch that I was tempted to turn it off. To ignore her cries because her words were too disturbing to hear. That's the power of white privilege. I can stop listening. I can choose to look the other way. I can choose to remain innocent and even ignorant – playing Monopoly - all the while thinking the game's fair for everyone. When it is not. And never has been.

Jones' truth-telling reminded me of another woman's searing plea. In a racially and religiously hierarchical system, the Canaanite woman with a sick child is on the very bottom rung of the ladder. She too cries out from a place of deep pain, demanding to be heard and seen from the privileged in her society. And not unlike now, many of them simply refuse to engage her. But the woman keeps shouting. On her knees before the great miracle worker she begs for mercy. And then to our horror Jesus responds from a place of implicit bias. He dismisses her as do the others, calling her a dog. A cringeworthy moment, for sure. His words might be harder to hear than the woman's desperate cries.

Readers struggle with this text so much that we often try to explain away Jesus' words by saying that he was playfully testing the woman. That the word he uses for dogs is actually the word for cute, little puppies. This can't possibly be an insult. But these are the interpretations of white privilege. In them we seek to excuse Jesus… because we want to be excused. When we dare to look at Jesus' bias, we must also look at our own. This story questions our privilege, our assumptions, and our judgment of people who differ most from us. Now, I realize that some of you may be questioning me, wanting to turn off this live stream video as you hear me confront the meaning of this text and its central figure who ate with tax collectors and sinners, and then completely dismisses this marginalized woman.

The good news of this story is that it does not end with Jesus' dismissive words. The Canaanite mother won't let go of the promise of healing for her child. She won't let Jesus off the hook. And Jesus pays attention to her need. He looks upon her and no longer sees an undeserving human being, but a beloved child of God. Despite his privilege, Jesus is able to choose the way of God's unequivocal mercy. By not turning away from the woman's cries, he is able to understand what he had done, and how he had behaves. And he changes. As painful as it was to be confronted by her, he chose to engage her. And you might say that as a result, both of their lives were transformed. The woman's daughter was given restored health. And Jesus was given an expansive understanding of the Kingdom he was to establish.

In her memoir, I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness, Austin Channing Brown believes that "when we talk about race today, with all the pain packed into that conversation, the Holy Spirit remains in the room. This doesn't mean the

conversations aren't painful, aren't personal, aren't charged with emotion. But it does mean we can survive. We can survive honest discussions about slavery, about convict leasing, about stolen land, deportation, discrimination, and exclusion. We can identify the harmful politics of gerrymandering, voter suppression, criminal justice laws, and policies that disproportionately affect people of color negatively. And we can expose the actions of white flight, the real impact of all-white leadership, the racial disparity in wages, and opportunities for advancement. We can lament and mourn. We can be livid and enraged. We can be honest. We can tell the truth. We can trust that the Holy Spirit is here. We must. For only by being truthful about how we got here can we begin to imagine another way."

Perhaps, the scariest and most uncomfortable thing about the outspoken words of the two women whose stories we heard today is that once we start listening to them, we must be willing to do something about what we've heard. When we stop ignoring their suffering, we begin to cry out in solidarity that the game has always been fixed. We must be willing to change if we are going to worship Jesus not only with our lips, but in our lives. The hope of our mutual and interdependent salvation lies in our capacity to listen, to learn and then to change. Jesus said, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." May it be so. Amen.