

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

¹⁵ But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." ¹⁶ Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just 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." ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

(Matthew 15:10, 15-29)

May the peace of our Lord be with you.

It is such an honor to join you this morning. Tim and I have been talking about this for months, and so I've been anticipating this weekend and this moment and I'm so thrilled that it's finally here. But I can't go a step further without sharing my gratitude: to your pastor—Tim, thank you—and to Jim, your communications director, and to all of those who've contributed to our worship, and to Gary Davis and the group of Companis workers and friends who hosted me at a really wonderful reception and dinner last night. I'm here because of their hard work, and I just want to ensure I acknowledge that this morning.

I bring you greetings from occupied Washington, D.C., a city under siege from within.

For the last eight and a half months ... [Aside] *My God, it feels more like eight and a half years, doesn't it?* [Shake head] ... for the last eight and a half months we've been holding on for dear life at the epicenter of what feels like a massive shift in the way America works. The daily, sometimes hourly upheavals emanating from the White House are sending shockwaves of uncertainty, anxiety, anger, and fear across the nation and around the globe. Families ripped apart ... children, separated from their parents, in handcuffs and detention cells ... Military and intelligence leaders removed from the National Security Council, replaced by bloggers and white supremacists ... attacks on the judiciary, attacks on the sick, and demands of loyalty not to our nation's

founding principles, but to an untested, impulsive, and self-absorbed demagogue who rose to power by stoking our fears and speaking our prejudices—and, it seems, with the help of a hostile foreign power. And just when you think it can't get any worse...well, you know the drill by now, right?

It seems a fitting time for people like us to think long and hard about what we stand for: our mission, our purpose, our values. As the old saying goes, "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything." And so I was encouraged to hear that you're spending this season exploring the Affirmation of Values you adopted last spring—reminding yourselves and one another of why you're here and what you will do, as individuals and as a community, in light of your calling and your context. Last week, you took a look at...which values statement? (You didn't know there would be a quiz, did you?) *"We will be present to one another and to our neighbors."*

This morning, we'll examine this statement: *"We will actively work to recognize and change our own biases and to fight racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ageism and other systemic prejudices."* And as our textual springboard, we're going to use this passage you've heard recently, I think: the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15. Your pastor preached on this text just a month ago, right?

So you remember the story. After months of popular acclaim in Galilee, the Teacher and his disciples have attracted the attention of some very powerful people—and made some very powerful enemies. Religious leaders, dispatched from Jerusalem on a mission to challenge Jesus and refute his teachings, hound their steps. Word reaches them that their friend and ally, John the Baptist, has been brutally executed at the hand of Herod. And all the while, the crowds press in on them, hungry for the hope and healing that have become Jesus's brand among the harried people of Roman Judea.

That's when this woman appears. The ancient storyteller identifies her first by her race: she's a Canaanite, one of Israel's most ancient, most reviled enemies. It's an odd word, one that had largely fallen out of popular use by the time this gospel was written near the end of the first century, and its appearance here would have conjured up images of the Exodus and the divine mandate to exterminate the inhabitants of Canaan. Is the storyteller engaging in dog whistle politics here, using a code word to arouse racist sentiments among some of his readers?

The Canaanite woman is further identified by her behavior: she's shouting at Jesus, to the great annoyance of his disciples. "Lord, get rid of her," they implore. Never mind that her shouts are cries for help, or that her daughter is "terribly demonized." Their request seems reasonable, given that Jesus's only reaction to the hurting woman thus far has been silent indifference.

The Teacher responds to his disciples' request with one of the most uncharitable sayings attributed to him in the canonical gospels: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Let’s don’t forget that the health and wholeness of a child is at stake here.

When the woman breaks through the protective cordon of disciples and makes her case directly to Jesus, he doubles down, topping it off with a racial slur: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

(And before we go on, let’s be quite clear this goes beyond mere incivility. This *is* a slur. There is significant evidence in Jewish texts contemporary to the life of Jesus that “dog” was used in this way, and had been for generations. But even if that weren’t the case, under what circumstances is it okay to use an animal, *any* type of animal, as a circumlocution for a person, or a group of people? To call a person a monkey, to call a people group pigs, or to illustrate a type of person with long, rat-like noses? Answer: none. It is never okay to do this. And yet here it is, coming from the mouth that kissed Mary’s virgin lips. We progressive Christians—and progressive Baptists especially—like to hold up Jesus’s interactions with women as evidence that the gospel’s core message runs counter to the debasement of women in ancient and contemporary culture. This story doesn’t usually get mentioned in those conversations.)

Getting back to the story: the woman, desperate enough to collaborate with Jesus in her own debasement, offers a clever retort: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Let your eyes linger over the word “master” for a moment. It’s an interesting choice on the part of the woman here, isn’t it? She’s saying, *My child and I may be dogs, but we serve the same master as the children. We dogs are quite content with the rubbish that falls from the feast, sir.*

At this, the Teacher *finally* responds in the way we expect, granting the woman’s wish, healing her daughter, and commending her faith—and the storyteller confirms that it was done instantly, just as Jesus commanded. All’s well that ends well. Right?

But wait. This is *Jesus* we’re talking about here, the very model of moral conduct, the Exemplar. How in God’s name are we to justify or even explain behaviors in Jesus that would clearly, unequivocally be sinful any one of us followed the example he sets here?

Let’s first declare that “all’s well that ends well” isn’t sufficient justification. We can’t fall back on some consequentialist, “ends justify the means” legitimization of behavior that is, on its face, bigoted and cruel.

And we can’t overlay our ideas about Jesus’s character on a text that pre-dates them—in other words, we can’t argue, “Jesus was pure in thought, word, and deed; therefore, his conduct here *must* be righteous.”

Well, actually, we *can* do this. We’ve been doing it for centuries, ignoring the clear, face-value meaning of one of the most ancient accounts of the character and works of our Teacher for the sake of dogma. If we’re going to keep it up, we ought at least to blush a

little when we do it. Because *when* we do this—when we declare immoral conduct to be moral simply because God is one doing it—we justify that same behavior in God’s children, in ourselves. This is how people who claim the name of Christ can manage to support policies like the Muslim ban or the ending of DACA, and still feel Christlike while they’re doing it. It’s how Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas and a member of President Trump’s Evangelical Executive Advisory Board, can go on TV this week to talk about DACA and say things like this: “Jesus said we’re to love our neighbors [...] but while Christian compassion is one consideration, it isn’t the only consideration [...] The Bible also says that God’s the one that established nations and borders. *God is not necessarily an open borders guy, as a lot of people would think that he is.*”

Here’s a pro-tip: one of the greatest, gravest errors we can make with the biblical text is to excuse actions in it that are unjust or immoral on their face simply because God or Jesus is the actor. To do so is to adopt a hermeneutic of horror—for this type of biblical interpretation is responsible for nearly every horror committed by Christians in God’s name from the time of Jesus himself to the present day. From the Crusades to the Inquisition to slavery to the church’s initial response to the HIV/AIDS crisis.

So then, what *can* we do with this story?

Well, here’s a modest proposal: if the answer to the question, “What would Jesus do?” is, at least in this *one* instance, “Act like a big ol’ racist jerk,” we should perhaps consider how *that* affects our conception of God and our doctrine of the incarnation... and our understanding of *ourselves*.

And here’s a hypothesis, for your consideration: What if this story is really about the divinity and humanity of Jesus? What if it answers longstanding questions about how Jesus can be both fully God and fully human, and what it meant for God to become incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth?

Let’s begin by asking ourselves *why* someone like Jesus would use a racial slur in a self-serving power-play with an oppressed woman, when doing so runs counter to his own stated values. Well, let’s start at the beginning. He grew up in a human household, among human beings and in a human community. And the language Jesus uses here is almost certainly language he grew up hearing—at home, in his faith community, from authority figures everywhere. He’s heard it hundreds of thousands of times, perhaps millions, by this point in his life.

On top of all that, Jesus has a human brain, a brain just like yours and mine. And we know today that human brains develop by taking in data from the world around them—11 million bits of data every second, the neurologists tell us—and creating from it all an implicit understanding of how our world works. This understanding of how the world works, built up slowly over time through exposure to our context and culture, becomes a part of the software by which the brain functions.

And it lives in what’s today known as your fast brain: the part of your brain that processes sense data *quickly*, so we can respond quickly to potential threats. And get this: your fast brain works so quickly, you don’t *experience* it working at all. It moves too fast for your conscious brain, your rational brain, even to see. And so it’s always there, filtering and interpreting data based on that implicit worldview, running behind the scenes, working without our intention, awareness, or control, to keep us safe.

Usually, that’s a very good thing. It’s the thing that allows you to slam on the brakes when the car you’re following stops short on the freeway. It’s the thing that allows you to read words on a page or interpret symbols on a street sign without pausing to think at all about what you’re doing.

It’s a good thing...except when it’s not. Because sometimes things get coded into our implicit understanding of how the world works that aren’t good.

I grew up in a small town in rural Pennsylvania, surrounded by people who looked like me. My high school class of 140 included only two people of color: Rodney, who was African American, and Kim, who was Asian. Over the four years we attended school together, I spent, at most, two total hours in conversation with Rodney. We weren’t in any of the same classes or on any of the same sports teams, so our social circles rarely intersected. During those same four years, however, I spent hundreds, maybe thousands, of hours watching television shows like *Sanford and Son*, *The Jeffersons*, *Diff’rent Strokes*, and *The Cosby Show*.

And so by the time I left home for college, I was unconsciously carrying two powerful illusions with me. First, I sincerely believed my parents’ generation had solved the problem of racism for good. That’s what my history classes, all of which were taught by white teachers, seemed to be saying in the way we studied the Civil Rights Movement. The experiences of George and Louise Jefferson, Arnold and Willis, and the Cosbys appeared to confirm it. Depictions of racism on those shows were always by the hand of a single white acting in isolation, excused by their ignorance, and fixed with a little basic education in 30 minutes or less. (Incidentally, as someone who was assigned the male sex at birth and was socialized male, I also entered adulthood believing my grandparents’ generation had solved sexism.)

The second illusion I carried was a fallacious and destructive understanding of life as a black person in America—one formed not by real experiences with real black people, but by fictional experiences, or experiences edited and curated for the purpose of selling ad time in the media.

I gradually shed the first illusion in my twenties and thirties; my gender transition, and the awakening to the reality of privilege that accompanied it, sealed the deal. But the second, insinuated upon my consciousness by my culture, my society, and my community, has proven harder to root out. It frightens and angers me to know there are

remnants of it lying undetected in my fast brain, infecting my subconscious like a cancer.

Because the problem, you see, is that our values don't live in our fast brains. They're problem solving skills that we apply rationally to specific types of problems, which means that they live in our slow brains. And if our fast brains skew the data set before it gets to our slow brains, then what does that mean? Well, it means we can apply our values to that data with complete integrity, and walk away feeling like we've made a fair and just decision—but if we're applying our values to a skewed data set, what will the result necessarily be? Skewed.

And *that*, my friends, is a big part of why CEO's tend to be significantly taller than other people. Not because being taller makes you a better leader, but because our fast brains connect height with authority and security. And why do they do it? They do it because our implicit worldview formed during a time when every single authority figure in your world was someone you had to look at like this [look up] to look in the eye.

It's why study after study shows more conventionally attractive kindergarteners get more one-on-one time with their teachers than those who are less attractive. It's a big part of why women earn only 80 cents for every dollar a man earns in this country. It's a big part of why when whites in this country get pulled over by the police, they get tickets (or warnings), and when blacks get pulled over, they get shot.

And it's a big part of how we can hold gospel values, and still act in ways that mirror the prejudices of our world, or build communities and institutions that reflect those prejudices. Just like Jesus did. Not because he was a bad person. But because he was a person, fully human.

How many of you came in today consciously and intentionally holding beliefs you consider to be prejudiced? None of you. How many of you had your consciousness formed in a society and a culture marked by systemic racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, islamophobia, fear and distrust and hatred of the other?

Learning to recognize and accept this truth about ourselves—that our very human brains can and do act invisibly to undermine our values—is the first step to “actively working to recognize and change our own biases,” as your church's values statement says, “and to fighting racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ageism and other systemic prejudices.” The next step is to interrogate your past, those implicit understandings of how the world works insinuated on your own mind by the world you grew up in—to do so on your own, and in community.

And though this is, in a very real way, the work of the gospel, it isn't the work of an hour or two on Sunday morning. It's the work of a lifetime. And in that work, which doesn't end but only begins as we depart from this place, I want to wish you well—and may the blessings of deep insight and willing vulnerability go with you. AMEN.