



AN OPEN LETTER TO YOUTH MINISTERS - AMANDA MBUVI

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DEAR YOUTH MINISTERS,

My daughter has taken up acro gymnastics, a sport in which a pair or small group perform routines together. The effectiveness of the routine depends on how well the members of the group come together as one, bringing their different roles into perfect harmony. For girls, uniform requirements extend to having the same hairstyle, and of course the same outfit. At the upper levels, they wear elaborately decorated leotard dresses similar those worn by figure skaters, the kind that give the illusion of showing more skin than they actually do. Or at least they’re supposed to give that illusion. From what I’ve seen so far, the sport doesn’t have a type—participants come from a range of backgrounds and even have different body shapes. And yet, in the competitions I’ve seen so far, the multi-hued gymnasts were all wearing leotard dresses designed for someone with white skin, so that several of the girls had heads and legs an entirely different color than their torsos.

In some communities, the idea of the people of God turns out to be like those leotards. Theoretically it’s supposed to fit everyone, but it’s actually only focused on a certain range of identities. The recent New York Times article “A Quiet Exodus: Why Black Worshipers are Leaving White Evangelical Churches” provides an example:

This time of the week two years earlier, there would have been no question. Ms. Pruitt, 46, would have been getting ready for her regular Saturday afternoon worship service, at a former grocery store overhauled into a state-of-the-art, 760-seat sanctuary. In the darkened hall, where it would have been hard to tell she was one of the few black people in the room, she would have listened to the soaring anthems of the praise bands. She would have watched, on three giant screens, a sermon that over the course of a weekend would reach one of the largest congregations in the country.

But Ms. Pruitt has not been to that church since the fall of 2016. That was when she concluded that it was not, ultimately, meant for people like her. She has not been to any church regularly since.

...Black congregants — as recounted by people in Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Fort Worth and elsewhere — had already grown uneasy in recent years as they watched their white pastors fail to address police shootings of African-Americans. They heard prayers for Paris, for Brussels, for law enforcement; they heard that one should keep one’s eyes on the kingdom, that the church was colorblind, and that talk of racial injustice was divisive, not a matter of the gospel. There was still some hope that this stemmed from an obliviousness rather than some deeper disconnect.

Then white evangelicals voted for Mr. Trump by a larger margin than they had voted for any presidential candidate. They cheered the outcome, reassuring uneasy fellow worshipers with talk of abortion and religious liberty, about how politics is the art of compromise rather than the ideal. Christians of color, even those who shared these policy preferences, looked at Mr. Trump’s comments about Mexican immigrants, his open hostility to N.F.L. players protesting police brutality and his earlier “birther” crusade against President Obama, claiming falsely he was not a United States citizen. In this political deal, many concluded, they were the compromised.

The black congregants in this article discovered that their churches were only willing to receive them insofar as they disregarded elements of themselves and their experiences to fit within narrow “colorblind” parameters.

As the acro leotards illustrate, being “colorblind” isn’t the best way to be inclusive. Rather than

pretending that everyone is the same, we need a way to see and live with our differences while still coming together. We need concepts of belonging, selfhood, human flourishing, and joy that nurture diverse communities of whole people.

READING AS WHOLE PEOPLE

Scripture can play an essential role in nurturing diverse communities of whole people, but some ways of reading the Bible instead reinforce the centrality of an “unmarked” identity that doesn’t need to be named because it is the standard. Those who share an unmarked identity are just normal, while those who do not require special clarification. For example, pantyhose often comes in a shade called “suntan.” Even though people with suntans come in a variety of colors, the pantyhose makers do not feel the need to provide any further descriptive adjectives to explain whose skin their product matches.

One way that people put an unmarked identity at the center of biblical interpretation is by treating every biblical verse as if it came out of a fortune cookie—a free-floating utterance whose meaning does not depend on its context. Verses that originally addressed the people Israel become personalized and individualized, so that words spoken to a particular set of people in particular circumstances become generic promises addressed to any listening “you.” This approach to reading not only distorts the meaning of the text, but also sets the foundation for engaging scripture as the self unencumbered by circumstances. It imagines that Bible readers come from a place of privilege in which their lives are impacted only by their personal choices and inner states. Such an approach to scripture (and to faith in general) leaves no room for it to speak to issues like race, gender, citizenship and socioeconomic status, which function on a societal level.

Exiling such concerns from scripture marginalizes them as something other than and beneath spiritual matters, resulting in fragmented individuals and fragmented church communities. Treating scripture as the disembodied voice of God speaking to the disembodied believer turns scripture reading into a performance akin to curating one’s social media presence. Authentic encounter requires scripture reading to proceed from a different premise, one that embraces a wider array of human experience. A more holistic approach begins by acknowledging that the Bible portrays complex individuals navigating complex contexts, in texts that reflect the histories and cultures through which they were forged. Its transcendence works through that reality, not in spite of it. The words of the ancients come to us as scripture because of the work of God reaching into their particularity and drawing it into a larger redemptive project.

The word of God transforms our relationship to the society in which we live, but it does not negate its impact on our lives, as Abraham’s experience illustrates. Back when he was Abram, God called him:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3 NRSV).

Abram is not like a student going away to college, leaving the house where he grew up for the first time. God’s instructions mandate a far more radical transition. The promise of blessing depends on Abram walking away from the entire social system that had given structure and meaning to his life, to a new life defined so fundamentally in terms of relationship with God that God does not even name Abram’s destination.

At first glance this call might seem to support the idea of relationship with God taking place in a space untouched by human ways of thinking about identity and belonging, but Genesis depicts something more nuanced than that. For the rest of the book, Abram/Abraham and the members of his household try to reconcile a promise articulated in grand, generation-spanning terms with the immediate concerns of day to day life. They struggle to live into a new divinely bestowed identity and its implications while still navigating the expectations and assumptions of people playing by the old rules. Even though God calls Abram to leave behind those rules, they do not therefore cease to impact his experience. They continue to shape the larger society in which he lives and the individuals whom he encounters. So Abraham occupies the same social position, but differently.

If anything, Abraham's relationship to the old rules of identity becomes more complicated. Living between (at least) two definitions means that his social identity can never slip from conscious awareness. It can never become unmarked, in any context, because another mode of identity is always there preempting resolution. Having left the home community where he needs no explanation, Abraham spends the rest of his days as an outsider. The call to follow God to an unspecified destination keeps him from reclaiming even a measure of settledness by assimilating to another way of life.

Calling Abram away from his father's house places relationship with God above and beyond human conceptions of identity, but it does not erase their significance in his life. Instead, it functions to heighten his awareness of them. Where he had been able to take certain things for granted, Abraham must now grapple with his identity and rethink every relationship, including to the various members of his household, whose roles in the new regime are not immediately clear. Abraham's experience points to the theological limitations of engaging scripture through an unmarked identity. Certain aspects of what it means to be the people of God are best conveyed through the experience of marginalization. The awkwardness of living between two (or more) worlds characterizes those who choose to be reckoned according to the word of God while continuing to live in societies that play by different rules.

BELONGING TO THE FAMILY OF GOD: BLESSED TOGETHER

In addition to demonstrating the importance of reading as whole people, Genesis also provides a powerful vision of belonging, selfhood, human flourishing, and joy. It does this through its powerful but theologically underutilized genealogies. In contrast to the reductionist tendency to view family as a biologically affiliated group of people in a nuclear or slightly larger unit, Genesis presents an expansive view of kinship that uses genealogy to incorporate even the cosmos under the rubric of family (2:4). The recurring genealogical formula "these are the generations of..." provides the structure for the entire book. Through genealogy and narrative and the interplay between them, Genesis situates human diversity within a family tree that links not only all humanity, but also all creation in a single network. And in that network, the fruitfulness of any branch depends on the well-being of the entire tree.

From the first, the Bible embeds human flourishing in the broad scope of God's care and concern. God never directs the promise/blessing of being fruitful toward a single isolated individual or collective. In the creation story of Gen 1, "humans are blessed...with respect to the very same creatures of sea and sky who have just received their own blessing and charge to multiply. Therefore, the human vocation can only be fulfilled if we take our place among the non-human species." Similarly, God promises fruitfulness to the descendants of Abraham (17:6) and after assigning Isaac the primary role, specifically reiterates that promise to Ishmael (17:20). God's promises to both brothers illustrate that "legitimate...fruitfulness cannot be secured to the

detriment of [others] that are equally blessed by God.” Being fruitful is not a predicate of the individual as such, but rather a function of life in relationship with those who are, in a significant sense, different (Isaac has a covenantal role that Ishmael does not share, while humans uniquely bear the image of God) (Davis, BIG, 114).

In this view, one is not simply blessed, as though blessing could be limited to the confines of an individual life. Rather, we are among the blessed: part of a network of nurture encompassing all creation, and inextricably bound to all the recipients of God’s care and concern. Blessing derives its meaning in accordance with the involvement of God in the world in ways that transcend the limitations of our selves, our communities, our sort of people, or even our species. It transcends even theological distinctions rooted in the word of God.

Biblical scholar Joel Kaminsky finds the sibling stories of Genesis drawing attention to the relationship between interpersonal reconciliation and divine blessing. He explains, “the strong association between the notion of seeing and the divine or human face recurs too frequently in these sibling stories to be coincidental.... [T]he Joseph narrative may be hinting at a connection that runs through the stories of Jacob and Esau, and Isaac and Ishmael, and all the way back to Cain and Abel. That is, if one hopes to see God’s face and thus receive God’s blessing, one must be reconciled with one’s brother.” Joseph’s new life in Egypt breaks decisively with his past; nevertheless, he remains bound to his brothers and none of them fully experience blessing until they come to terms with that connection.

Genesis presents our condition as one of interdependence. Accordingly, flourishing and joy cannot be realized in isolation. To see God’s face and thus receive God’s blessing, we must restore broken relationships with all those to whom we are inextricably bound.

LIVING IN THE NOT YET: FINDING JOY IN THE IN BETWEEN

Transforming estrangement into connection requires work of a sort that American culture does not like to acknowledge. Most of our cinematic love stories conclude with the couple having definitively come together, preferring an implied “and they all lived happily ever after” to a depiction of the work required to sustain a marriage. This approach allows viewers to assume that a happy relationship consists only of happy moments. However, therapists looking to predict the success of a relationship do so on the basis of how a couple handles conflict. In contrast to our mythology of romantic love, the experts understand that a happy marriage relies on more than instinctual appreciation of one’s partner.

Much of the cultural output of American Christianity depicts relationship with God in the same limited way that American films depict romantic love. In focusing on moments of religious ecstasy, such depictions ignore that which is more ordinary but that makes the spiritual life stronger and more profoundly satisfying. The Bible depicts mountaintop experiences both literal and metaphorical. But relationship with God involves more than having a spontaneous emotional reaction to God’s attributes or God’s actions. As Abraham’s experience illustrates, walking with God consists primarily of an actively chosen rootedness in a core identity frequently in tension with experience.

Emphasizing a certain kind of emotional reaction leads believers to dismiss the work of building real reconciled relationships because it involves feelings of discomfort at odds with the sense of well-being that they associate with connection with God. But relationships are at their most powerful when they take us beyond our feelings, such as when we care for an infant in the middle of the



night when we'd rather be sleeping, motivated by love for the child and for a partner who needs the rest. Rather than interpreting uncertainty, failure, awkwardness, and increased vulnerability as signs that something has gone wrong, we need to recognize them as hallmarks of the only path that leads to lasting joy. And in that sense they are themselves joyful—not because they become easy, but because God triumphs through them.

Every year I look forward to the coming of fall. To me, passing through trees at the peak of their color feels like glory itself. My husband has a different view, though. Growing up in a place without that seasonal rhythm, he only saw leaves change color when a tree was dying. As a result, the colors have a much more negative connotation for him. Seeing the beauty of fall depends on a perspective in which the colors are part of a larger pattern of renewal, not an unexpected occurrence that portends only loss. In the same way, if we see the awkwardness of our lives in between as part of a larger work of God, we can see beauty where we may be accustomed to seeing only imperfection and failure. We can find belonging together and rejoice in our circumstances, not because we shut out the things that don't fit our image of "peaceful happiness," but because we understand that the things that make us feel shut out also connect us to one another and help create the beauty that God is bringing forth through us.