

DIFFERENCE AND FAITH

June 12, 2016

1 Kings 21: 1-21; Psalm 5; Galatians 2: 15-21; Luke 7: 36-8: 3

We have had quite some distinctive readings today and quite some distinctive women too. And it is kind of interesting that this is so because, as we said last week, when we talked about widows, in the periods of time that we are reading about, we might theorize that women did not have that much ability to develop their distinctive characteristics. Why? Because as we say now they were chattel, they were property, they belonged to their fathers or their husbands or their sons or their other male relatives.

But, as we see, that does not have to keep anyone's needs or desires or differences down. In the story from 1 Kings, we have Jezebel telling her husband, Ahab, to never mind about his problems with real estate, that she will take care of it, and certainly she does, in the most direct and effective way possible.

And then in Luke, the story of the dinner party, we have the strange sinner woman who shows up because Jesus is present and, with no hesitation caused by manners or customs of the party, proceeds to weep and wash Jesus' feet with her tears and her hair, asking for his blessing and forgiveness for her sins. And, of course, receives it.

So these are women who despite their status will make a difference in lives of their communities, one by evil means, and one by faith. Jezebel did not really have a problem with status because she was married, but the sinner woman at the dinner party did until Jesus held out his hand to her. And this

extension of ourselves to those with differences is what we have talked about earlier this year, and what is so appropriate as we move forward this year, a year which promises to be expansive with proclamations of differences both real and farcical. So the question is, how to extend ourselves to others while still maintaining our own distinctiveness. We do not want to be the same as everybody else, but we do want to be able to develop alliances and work together as we have said before. We want to be able to make those differences work for us and for others. And that is why today, I want to spend a little bit of time talking about Muhammad Ali.

Muhammad Ali, who died last Friday, was the grandson of a slave and spent much of his life making himself up. Though he assumed the profession that might have been assigned to many young, strong, black males of his era, he determined he own unique style. He really did, didn't he? And, as soon as he began to be successful in it, that is as soon as he won the heavyweight championship from Sonny Liston, he began to declare his own distinctive stance beyond his fighting style. He renounced what he called his "slave name", Cassius Marcellus Clay, also his father's name, also the name of the owner of his grandfather who had eventually become an abolitionist. He renounced the Christian church and converted to the Nation of Islam at the age of 22. When he refused to serve in the Army he famously said "I ain't got no quarrel with them Vietcong." He was telling people who he was and along with it came, as many of us will remember, an onslaught of denunciation. He had been a hero for being a fighter in a new style; now he was booed as a traitor. He could no longer box or travel and he was fined \$10,000.

Yet, as Joyce Carol Oates says, “The heart of the champion is this: One never repudiates ones deepest values, one never *gives in*.”

And so it was with Muhammad Ali. One of his major allies in never giving in was his faith as a Muslim. His faith gave him his name, it gave him, as he said, the ability not to be “the white man’s Negro”,* it gave him the endurance to carry on when he was not allowed to fight anymore, and to say that the outsized life and rewards that fighting brought him were not what were important anyway, that what was important was to stand up for your values. He knew that what he was giving up was part of what he was fighting against anyway. As David Remnick of the New Yorker tells us, “Ali was not blind to the hypocrisies and brutality of the “game” that had been his professional life. The source of his fame was a sport in which race was often an ugly element of its history, a contest in which one man tries to beat another senseless, tries to inflict temporary brain injury (a knockout) on another. Ali reaped millions of dollars from the fight game, and yet he was, at times, ambivalent about that history and the lurid spectacle of one man fighting another, particularly one *black* man fighting another.

“They stand around and say, ‘Good fight, boy: you’re a good boy; good goin’,” Ali said, in 1970. “They don’t look at fighters to have brains. They don’t look at fighters to be businessmen, or human, or intelligent. Fighters are just brutes that come to entertain the rich white people. Beat up on each other and break each other’s noses, and bleed, and show off like two little monkeys for the crowd, killing each other for the crowd. And half the crowd is white. We’re just like two slaves in that ring. The masters get two of us big old black slaves and let us fight it out while they bet: ‘My slave can whup your slave.’ That’s what I see when I see two black people fighting.”**

But even as this was so, even as this was what he saw, he created his own particular self, with his own particular style, beginning with “fight like a butterfly, sting like a bee” and moving on to Rope-a-Dope when he had to. He would even start working on his opponents long before they got in the ring, in his own particular poetic way, as in this before the Sonny Liston fight when he made this rhyme popular:

Now Liston disappears from view,
The crowd is getting frantic.
But our radar stations have picked him up,
He’s somewhere over the Atlantic.***

And he articulated his vision in a way that no fighter ever had before.

I am America,” he once said. “I am the part you won’t recognize. But get used to me. Black, confident, cocky, my name, not yours; my religion, not yours; my goals, my own; get used to me.”***

He could do this because he had a faith that supported him and that he had found for himself. It had not been thrust upon him. He found his name through that faith; his way of interacting with his sport, with his country and its racism, and with the world, and with his championship - and all of this probably came about because of the strength that his embrace of Islam brought to him.

Now just as that sinner woman in Luke seemed not to care who thought what of her when she came into the Pharisee’s dinner party with her urn of ointment and wept over Jesus’ feet, so Ali never seemed to care much if people criticized him. He was doing what his distinctive nature told him was the right thing to do and what his faith supported him in. He did

certainly care that people noticed him and he took care to make that happen, especially in the early part of his life. It was that faith that let him keep on going in the world of boxing even after he had lost his light footedness and had to find a different strategy, and it is his faith which I argue, let him make friends with the world again. Once he was allowed to come back to boxing again in the 70s, he had to reinvent himself and it was a while before he became a hero once more. But he was still the inimitable Muhammad Ali and he could negotiate his way through his sport and through his fame, whether reviled or hailed. His faith gave him heart, and it gave heart not only to him but to the others who revered him. He let people know that you don't have to be humble and down even if you've been stripped of your title and of your way to make a living. And so he was a symbol not only of black pride but of heart, and as Joyce Carol Oates says, "By 'heart' we don't mean mechanical skill, nor even unusual strength and stamina and ambition; by 'heart' we mean something like spiritual character. The mystery of Muhammad Ali is this spiritual greatness, that seemed to have emerged out of a far more ordinary, even callow personality... Ali had long ago transcended his own origins and his own specific identity. As he'd once said: "Boxing was nothing. It wasn't important at all. Boxing was just meant as a way to introduce me to the world."*

And so it is for us all. We come into the world equipped with a specific set of equipment - identity, looks, background, associations, skills. We make more or less of them through ourselves and through faith; give ourselves heart through faith; introduce ourselves to the world through our unique selves, created and given strength through faith. I'm not telling you we

should or could all be Muhammad Ali, but that we all could ask faith to nurture our distinctiveness as we extend our hands out into the world with heart.

Let us pray: Lord, we thank you for the inspiration of Muhammad Ali, and we ask that you give us the heart to use ourselves in the world with the vigor and imagination that he did. Amen

* Oates, Joyce Carol, Muhammad Ali: Never the White Man's Negro in NY Times, June 6, 2016

** Remnick, David, The Outsized Life of Muhammad Ali in The New Yorker, June 4, 2016

*** Gates, Henry Louis Jr., Muhammad Ali, The Political Poet in NY Times, June 9, 2016