

A Word for the Weathered

It was January 15, 2018. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. The campus was closed for the day except for a program later in the evening. I decided to take advantage of this chilly Monday morning and take my time. I got ready for a brunch meeting I had in a few hours. I opened my blinds and the brightness reflecting off the snow filled my apartment. The snow was steady falling, but it was nothing for Michigan. I reached into the cabinet and pulled down my jar of flour. With a deep breath I began a process I know so well, combining measures of flour, milk, butter and baking powder to my bowl. I floured my counter and began to shape my biscuits as I waited for my ride to a mid-morning meeting.

“Weathering”

Like many others, I use baking as an opportunity to catch up on my growing list of podcasts. Immediately one of the hosts of NPR’s podcast Code Switch, Gene Demby, introduces today’s topic: the impact of racism on health. My interest is peaked as the podcast shares the story of Shalon Irving, a 36-year-old epidemiologist at the CDC who died just weeks after giving birth to her daughter in 2017 due to complications post-pregnancy.

The researchers and experts attributed Shalon’s death as a result not of race, but of racism. They call the term “weathering” and researchers are finding that the impact of systemic racism in the United States, the stress responses to micro-aggressions such as being followed around in stores, stopped by the police, or even being called the n-word create a response that the body internalizes and it can impact the very DNA of an individual.

The Dangers of Being a Black Girl

The statistics are striking – black women today are three times more likely to die in childbirth or after childbirth than white women. Black women are five times more likely than white women to report experiences of headache, upset stomach, tensing of muscles, or a pounding heart because of how they were treated in society based on their race in the past month. The American Journal of Public Health reports that black women are twice as likely to have higher stress scores than white women – regardless of age.

In fact, black women are dying faster and at higher rates than any other group in America from preventable diseases. For example, 82% of black women are over a healthy weight right now, 53% of black women are obese, and every 11 minutes 137 black women die from a preventable disease. T. Morgan Dixon, founder of health nonprofit GirlTrek, likened it to a plane full of black women crashing to the ground every 11 minutes.

The Mule of the World

The research and statistics made my heart weep for my sisters, aunts, cousins, mothers, and myself as I realized that Danyelle Solomon of the Center for American Progress was right, “The impact of systemic racism is manifesting itself in black women’s health.” I mean, Zora Neale Hurston did write in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that the black woman was the mule of the world. Hurston wrote this not to belittle black women, but to call to our attention the unnecessary burden and stress that is placed on black women in

particular.

If we're honest, "weathering" is also caused by the burden black women bear of being valued by the amount of pain we can endure, and how much we can give to others, and sacrifice for others oftentimes to the detriment of ourselves. This burden of blackness "weathers" a black woman's body and according to these statistics – kills her.

I mourn for the women whose lives have been cut short because of "weathering." I mourn for the generations of weathered ancestors who died at the hands of this patriarchal, white supremacist American system. I mourn for women like Erica Garner, Sandra Bland, and Shalon Irving. I mourn for the women whose names we do not know and faces we will never see on TV, names we won't read in our newspapers or hear on our podcasts. I mourn for the 137 black women who would succumb to preventable disease in the next few moments. I mourn for those of us who remain, and who move through life day-to-day with aches and pains and problems in our bodies that we cannot quite pinpoint. Those of us who are yet enduring the "weathering" of being a black woman in America.

Weathering in the Bible

Although I'm in mourning, as a womanist I am comforted by the way Scripture responds to the weathering of black women. Mark's account of Jesus healing the woman with the issue of blood in Mark 5:21-34 reveals to us how the Divine responds to weathered women.

After His journey to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (the non-Jewish side), where Jesus delivered the man with the Legion of demons, and restored his ability to function in society socially and economically, Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee again returning to the Jewish side. The oppressive Roman legions that monitored this side of the Sea also cripples the people socially, economically and politically.

These soldiers kept the privileged and powerful safe, while abusing, misusing and discarding the powerless and the poor. The legion, merely agents of the more powerful oppressive system, ravaged the lives of those they had taken captive. And the effects of this ravenous system were truly seen in the lives *and bodies* of the people Jesus encountered, like this nameless woman whose story Mark interjects in the midst of this larger narrative of the healing of Jairus' daughter.

While I write specifically to black women, this text has relevance for black communities as a whole. There are three words this text gives to the weathered that I'd like to share with you here:

1. You are debilitated, but not defined by what weathers you (v.25-26)

This woman was most likely known in the community by her ailment. At this point in her story, there were many who believed that she would never be healed. But, the woman herself believed that while she was debilitated by her health problem, she was not defined by it. On a larger scale she was not defined by the oppressive socio-economic system that alienated her on every level.

Black women know the statistics, we know what is stacked against us, but it does not define us. I know this to be true because like the woman in this

narrative, we continue to see healing and resolution even when others believe our journey is in vain.

2. Tell the whole truth (v. 33)

I am certain, when given the opportunity, that this woman did not just tell Jesus about her physical ailment, but also about all the loss she had suffered because of it. I image that she spoke about the system that made it difficult for her to receive care. She probably shared how no one believed her and how those who were supposed to support her abandoned her when she needed them most.

Verse 33 says that she told Jesus the whole truth. Likewise, black women are empowered to be truth-tellers. We have to tell the truth to our friends and family about what is happening to us physically, mentally, emotionally. We have to tell the truth to a society that attempts to ignore the root of what weathers us. We have to tell the truth to ourselves and realize that this truth is one that will set us free.

3. Accept your status as “Daughter” and know that you are whole (v. 34)

This woman entered the crowd as a nameless woman who had been bleeding for 12 years and left as a whole daughter of God. She had been alienated from society and community, but in a word God restores her to community. She was unclean, but in a word God made her clean. From the beginning of the narrative, this woman believed she was going to be healed and by the end of her encounter with Jesus, her status was changed to whole.

While I live as a black woman and see the effects of weathering on myself and others, I know that we will be healed and even more than that, I know that our God will continue to speak a word over us and make us whole.