

Year C, Epiphany 5, Black History Month  
Hope Central Church  
The Rev. Laura Ruth Jarrett  
2/10/19

#### Psalm 138

I give you thanks, O God, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise;  
I bow down towards your holy temple  
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your  
faithfulness;  
for you have exalted your name and your word above everything.  
On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.  
All the rulers of the earth shall praise you, O God, for they have heard the words of your mouth.  
They shall sing of the ways of God, for great is the glory of God.  
For though God is high, God regards the lowly; but the haughty God perceives from far away.  
Though I walk in the midst of trouble,  
you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies;  
you stretch out your hand,  
and your right hand delivers me.  
God will fulfil God's purpose for me;  
your steadfast love, O God, endures for ever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.

#### Luke 5:1-11

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishers had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Jesus got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked Simon to put out a little way from the shore. Then Jesus sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Teacher, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed Jesus.

Katie Geneva Cannon was born on January 3, 1950 in Fishertown, NC, the fourth child to Esau and Emmanuella Corine Lytle Cannon. She held a Bachelor of Science degree in Education from Barber-Scotia College, magna cum laude, and a Master of Divinity degree with honors from the Interdenominational Theological Center, in Atlanta in 1974. She was the first African-

American woman ordained in the United Presbyterian Church (USA) in 1974 and was the first African-American to earn a Ph.D from Union Theological Seminary (NYC) in 1983.

The Rev. Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon served on the faculties of Harvard Divinity School, the Episcopal Divinity School where she was my teacher, Temple University, and at the time of her death was the Annie Scales Rogers Professor at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Va.

At graduated time from seminary, I asked Katie what to do with what she taught. She said, You have been my student. Teach what I taught you.

Today I will fulfill my vow to Katie. I do so knowing that what Katie gives to you through me, is a beginning of revealing her genius. I am an imperfect vessel and not a black woman. Still I rise to teach with all my life force so that her life and work may be available to you who long to hear a saving word from somewhere, and most particularly from a black woman may who be like you or not. I rise to bring her word, grounded in community that survived and thrived, largely away from the white gaze, with her permission and urging so our congregation may have resources for to act with unctuousness, with invisible dignity, quiet grace, and un-shouted courage whether we are in or away from empire's gaze.

For my ordination in April, 2008, Katie sent this stole, a gift to her commemorating the 25th anniversary of her own ordination.

Please, will you pray with me?

We are truly never accurately reflected in Empire's gaze. Empire only looks at and looks for itself. When looking in empire's mirror we see ourselves distorted, un-beautiful, utilitarian only for empire's needs. We see and hear Empire's projection of it's thwarted need for us to serve it and not our families, communities and neighbors. You can hear it when it calls us mammy or mistress or unmanly.

If you listen to the news, if you grew up white, or straight or cis, or born a citizen, you might have once believed that God loves capitalism, that God appointed our president, that white, straight, cis people are more worthy of our national's attention for our needs, that financial success is a measure of a person's godness, that God loves us more, that God thinks and looks like us, that we are more approved of than black, asian, latinx, queer, woman folks. We believe we were all made equal, but our black women, know that empire does not. At Hope Central, we begun to suspect it is true for all of us - we are opening our eyes to what most black women have known since the boats carried their bodies from their homes and loved ones in African, and first arrived here on our shores in 1619. Our Black women have known all along that empire doesn't love us. The more privilege disguises the hook in us, the longer it takes for us to notice, but we, beloved ones, are beginning to see that we've all been had.

Since the election of 2016, in our congregation, we have been waking up to the hook. In solidarity with those who have always known, we are turning our attention again to Jesus's life and work - his practices and spiritual technologies for living in empire. We have been looking about for those who have lived the way of Jesus, found strength in spiritual community, and we have discovered Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, Howard Thurman - that great mystic, James Cones - the father of Black Liberation theology whose work the Rev. Benjamin Perkins gave us last

week. Today we turn to the Rev. Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon for her work and wisdom on our behalf.

Today, we turn to Dr. Cannon's work because she fished reliable wisdom out of the stream of oral tradition that flowed from grandmother, to mother, to daughters, from auntie to niece, from Church mothers to young women, wisdom about how to live in a world where your the black female body has been sold, traded, harmed, and thwarted by slavery, Jim Crow and all of Jim Crow's current iterations such as the school to prison pipe line, the disruption of family and intimate connections, livelihood and financial and health inequities, without property or choice about where to live and for whom to work. We turn to Dr. Cannon because she makes plain for us to see, the moral ways of black women - and their willingness to live, endure, laugh, and to love anyway.

We turn to Dr. Cannon's work because I believe what Dr. James Cone believes - he wrote:

"I believe that the cultural and religious resources in the black experience could help all Americans cope with the legacy of white supremacy and also deal more effectively with what is called "the war on terror." If white Americans could look at the terror they inflicted on their own black population—slavery, segregation, and lynching—then they might be able to understand what is coming at them from others. Black people know something about terror because we have been dealing with legal and extralegal white terror for several centuries. Nothing was more terrifying than the lynching tree."

The Rev. Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon is/was the founder, the inventor, the establisher of Womanist Ethics, an academic field that did not exist prior to 1983. Thus, she made a way out of no way.

When Dr. Cannon arrived at Union Theological Seminary in NYC, in the late 1970s, she wanted to do a Ph.D in Hebrew Bible because there in the Old Testament were the stories of Moses and the liberation of the Israelites from slavery. There were the admonitions of the ancient prophets against the ancient powers and principalities' abuse of the poor, the orphaned and the widows - such admonitions were decidedly not ancient for Dr. Cannon. Dr. Cannon's family, neighborhood, and church in Fishertown, NC found hope for living through the family and community's healing the trauma of slavery on the Cannon plantation only a generation before, the fortitude to live, endure, love and flourish even while living under Jim Crow. In Hebrew Bible were the stories and foundation for living ethically even while leaving slavery.

But at Union Theological Seminary, where no person of African descent had matriculated pursuing a Ph.D, the professors told Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon she couldn't use Hebrew Bible in that way - she had to do philologies, word studies, and base her work on the European and American scholars before her. The professors told her instead of the discipline of Hebrew Bible, she'd have to do work in Christian Ethics - that is - the study of how one might be a moral Christian person. There too, Dr. Cannon found that the foundational assumptions of Christian ethics, was that one (one assumed white and one assumed man) who had autonomy in his life could choose between one thing and another - one thing that might be moral as opposed to another thing that might not be moral. Shall I do this or this - was the order of inquiry.

But Dr. Cannon's dilemma were two fold: First - how was it that there could there be a system of Christian ethics for white men when it was white men who were the slave importers and

owners, who made and enforced Jim Crow laws which robbed Dr. Cannon's uncle of his legally held land, restricted the movements of the black community, who rode the black neighborhood of Fishertown for no discernible reason, who terrorized them physically and economically, who displayed bizarre acts of dominance over Dr. Cannon, her families and communities as far back as Slavery? How and why would a black woman want to participate in the work of Christian Ethics?

Katie's other dilemma was this - if a black woman has no choice about her life, if there is no choice between this thing and that thing, if the best a black woman can do was to only choose the "not worst thing" over the "worst thing", could a black woman be a moral agent in her heart, community, in the world? If an enslaved woman had to choose between a beating and caring for her children, if she had to choose between thwarting the master's rape and food for the next day, which was the moral thing to do? If a woman had to choose between working in white folks house or applying for welfare, which choice is moral?

Because there were no blocks in the field of Christian Ethics for the building of a Christian Ethics for black women, Dr. Cannon called the blocks into being.

In her doctoral dissertation, *Black Womanist Ethics*, she used the work of black women's literature, and the stories and wisdom of oral tradition to construct an ethical standard by which black women may see themselves reflected accurately and fully as moral agents in their real lived world.

Using the writings of Zora Neale Hurston, and adopting a word coined by Alice Walker, Dr. Cannon called into being a corner stone of Christian Ethics for Black women: the presence of the quality of Unctiousness - Unctiousness is defined in this way:

"[Unctiousness] is the quality of steadfastness, akin to fortitude, in the face of formidable oppression that serves as the most conspicuous feature in the construction of Black women's ethics. . . . this moral quality of life is not an ideal to be fulfilled but is a balance of complexities so that suffering will not overwhelm and endurance is possible. The moral premises and assumptions that are inherited from the Black community's oral tradition, accentuated by Hurston's life, emphasize the continual struggle and interplay of contradictory opposites as the highest good. Creatively straining against the extra restraints in one's life is virtuous living."

Dr. Cannon writes by way of example, "[Zora Neale] Hurston repeatedly found herself in situations wherein her head was in the lion's mouth and she was being forced to treat the lion very gently. Zora Hurston often had to act sincere in the most insincere situations." "Hurston learned to look at the world with her own eyes, formed her own judgments and de-mythologize whole bodies of so-called social legitimacy. Hurston balanced forethought with discerning deliberation so as to act from a perspective that was right for her."

"In essence, being unctuous helped Zora Neale Hurston decipher the various sounds in the larger world, to resist the demands for capitulation to the status quo, to affirm her worth without scampering around for male validation, to find meaning in the most despotic circumstances and to create possibilities where none existed before."

In her dissertation, Dr. Cannon found in the writing of Zora Neal Hurston, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, and the Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, three qualities or actions of unctuousness -

and I'd like to describe these three concepts so we may learn to recognize unctuousness, and take up unctuousness as a measure of our morality.

These three qualities are

invisible dignity,  
quiet grace, and  
un-shouted courage

Here are stories Dr. Cannon told about herself to testify, to illustrate the daring act of making her lost innocence into invisible dignity, her never practiced delicacy into quiet grace, and her force responsibility into unshouted courage.

invisible dignity,  
quiet grace, and  
un-shouted courage

Katie was raised, as I was, in the segregated south. In Fishertown, a neighborhood of Kannapolis many folks stayed home as much as possible so to avoid interacting with white people.

But Katie writes that her mother took her and her brothers and sisters to town - and in this way, one of the ways, Katie discovered that she was black and carried the burden of needing to know things at an early age about white people, for her own survival and the survival of her family and community. As a black child on the street among white people, her mother taught her both what white people might think of her, do to her if she behaved in particular ways like not stepping off the sidewalk for a white person who wanted to occupy the same space. At an early age, Katie, her brothers and sisters learned to negotiate their own dignity in the face what a white person might see, say, do. Too early on, but necessary for survival, black children lost their innocence to take up the work of self differentiation, I am me and not what they say I am, even in the face of grown up white people. Katie describes this knowing: I am me and not who they say - and this is invisible dignity. This is making lost innocence into invisible dignity.

Katie describes a second quality or action of unctuousness" - quiet grace. She writes, "Black women have never been granted the protective privileges that allow one to become immobilized by fear and rage. The Black woman's very life depends upon her being able to decipher the various sounds in the larger world, to hold in check the nightmare figures of terror, to fight for basic freedoms against the sadistic law enforcement agencies in her community, to resist the temptation to capitulate to the demands of the status quo, to find meaning in the most despotic circumstances and to create possibilities where none existed before."

This is quiet grace - and by quiet, Katie meant a grace that goes unheard and unregistered by white people and men.

invisible dignity,  
quiet grace, and  
un-shouted courage

The third quality or action of unctuousness in: in forced responsibility, un-shouted courage.

Katie writes, in her family and community of Fishertown, the only choice the women had for working for wages was in white people's houses - it was the only job option - here was no other. And there, in white people's houses, as a young girl, Katie learned from her aunt, the technologies of cooking, cleaning, and dealing with the white adults while children her very own age, played, watched television, and did not see or acknowledge her. Katie and others were proud of their capacities to take up their responsibilities. They were proud to be able to work hard, to feel themselves accomplished in their efforts. But this pride could not be expressed except inside the black community, well away from white people. In forced responsibility - unshouted courage.

invisible dignity,  
quiet grace, and  
un-shouted courage, these are the qualities of unctuousness - and now unctuousness is known in the academic canon of Christian Ethics.

As all ethics and theologies are composed and entered into the canon of what is known, they are writing in the context of a moment. The work of our giants Luther and Schiermacher were written for a specific time and context. Bonhoeffer wrote during the third reich. So it is with Katie's work at ethicist and theologian. But lest we think that Katie's writing is already archaic, written for a baby boomer generation whose grandparents were slaves, whose Greatest Generation parents lived under not just the Jim Crow time, but the actual Jim Crow laws, and whose truth might no longer valid for the Gen X and Millennial, Gen Y and Z Black Women, I'm telling you, some things have changed and some have not.

I tell you of Katie's work because I want to ask us to begin to notice the unctuousness of our black women, their invisible dignity, quiet grace and unsung courage among us. I want to praise them for their resilience among us, to thank them for their generosity in being with us because it might be that they are working twice as hard as we for the sake of being connected here.

I want us to learn from our black women - how to live joyfully, skillfully, enduring, even us well intentioned white folks and men. I want to ask us to learn from them the advanced spiritual ability and capacity of self-differentiation Katie called invisible dignity, the quiet grace required to decipher the various sounds in the larger world, to hold in check the nightmare figures of terror. I want us to be willing and able to fight for basic freedoms against the sadistic law enforcement agencies in our communities, to resist the temptation to capitulate to the demands of the status quo, to find meaning in the most despotic circumstances and to create possibilities where none existed before and to celebrate our un-sung courage - because we have it.

For today and for always, I want us to create the space our black women need to thrive. For today, unless she begins the conversation, don't ask our black women to teach us. Let this sermon be our gift from Dr. Kate Geneva Cannon. If you have a question you'd like to ask a black woman today, ask somebody white first, to check out your question and your intent. Our black woman are already working hard in our world. Let today be a holiday. And let Hope Central begin to be a place with our black women may rest. Let hope Central be a place of respite for them, and for all of us.

Lastly, I want Hope Central to be fishing in the waters of our own oral histories that have in them encoded unctuousness, our collective invisible dignity, quiet grace, and un-shouted courage. If

Empire offers us a distorted reflection of our true selves, if Empire wants to make us mammy or mistress or unmanly, I want us to be willing to be Ethicists and theologians for ourselves and for these, our beloved ones here at Hope Central, and in our communities, and in the world. I want, when we drop our nets into the waters of meaning making, of making respite, of seeking the holy that when our nets come up full of meaning and love, this community together will haul in the wealth of our common lives.

Amen.