

SYLLABUS – J-term 2008

Title of the Course: To Know the Heart of the Stranger

Instructor: Johanna Bos

Course description:

We will study the connections and interactions of racism and sexism as they promote and reinforce dominant structures and practices in religion and the world. One of the screens for our analysis will be the biblical category of the stranger as she/he occurs in narrative and legal regulations in the Torah. Textbooks in the area of liberationist feminism will provide a structure for critique and analysis both of the biblical period and our current context. Fictional material written by women who write from a minority perspective will provide another tool of access to worlds and experiences that may be unfamiliar to many.

Course objectives:

To understand more clearly and deeply the ideologies of racism and sexism, in their systemic connections, as they work together to uphold oppressive patriarchal modes of thought and practice. To link these ideologies to biblical material and reflect on both the material and the reality to which it speaks in new ways. We should come away from this course having gained in understanding the intertwining of sexism and racism in the United States and with a greater ability to address issues of domination, subordination and privilege. Ultimately we hope that all of us will seek to walk in solidarity with those whose voices have traditionally been undervalued and silenced and whose life experience has not counted in the traditions. Solidarity with the heart of the stranger is a consistent biblical requirement that must find concrete expression in the daily lives of faithful people today.

Method

The course will run from January 9 through January 23. Generally, we will meet in the afternoons for three hours with two days when we meet the entire day. Although the course is intensive and the subject intense, there should be some time built in to reflect and catch up on reading. During class time we will mix presentations from the instructor with discussions of readings and of our written statements. Classes will open with a prayer, reading and/or song and end in a similar manner. Students are expected to participate in offering an opening or closing liturgy, which can be done in small groups. [See attached guidelines]. Each student will bring an identity statement to the course for which the guidelines may be found below. A part or all of your statement will be read and discussed in class. In addition, there will be a description and analysis of a cross-cultural experience for which guidelines may be found below also. Some other unorthodox ways of learning may be explored, as drawing, music and/or dance.

Requirements

Students are expected to attend class at all times and to be prepared for discussion and other assigned activities. Absences on account of illness or other emergencies

should be cleared with the instructor ahead of time. Student evaluations by the professor take place on a non-competitive basis. All students begin the course with an A grade. Devaluation takes place if assignments are not met or for lack of participation in other ways, absences etc.

In Preparation

Before the course begins there are two written tasks to complete.

A. An identity statement should be ready in part ahead of time and students should continue to work on it during the course for handing in to the instructor at the end. There is no required length for this statement but it should be no shorter than five pages double spaced.

B. Everyone is expected to engage in one event of a cross-cultural nature and be prepared to discuss the experience in class.

Guidelines for identity statement and cross-cultural experience are included with the syllabus.

Read as much as possible ahead of time, especially the novels. We will begin the class with a discussion of language and how it reflects our ideologies and an essay on the subject will be posted on Blackboard. There will also be a posting from the book by bell hooks *Teaching to Transgress*.

N.B Before studying assigned material draw up a note on author and her context [you may research this on the Internet if you need to.]

Required Resources

Novels

Octavia Butler: *Kindred* (Beacon, 2003)

Alice Walker: *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (Harcourt 1992) ISBN 0151731527

Nella Larsen: *Passing* (Penguin 1997) ISBN: 0 14 11.8025 0

Memoir

Edwidge Danticat: *Brother, I'm Dying*

Textbooks

Marita Golden and Susan Richards Shreve: *Skin Deep*

bell hooks : *Black Looks* (Boston : South End, 1992) ISBN 0-89608-433-7

Johanna W.H.van Wijk-Bos: *Reformed and Feminist – A Challenge to the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991) ISBN 0-664-25194-3

Angela Y.Davis: *Women, Race and Class*. (Random House, 1983) ISBN 0-394-71351-6

Assigned biblical texts

Handouts

Recommended novels:

Gloria Naylor: *The Women of Brewster Place*

Toni Morrison. *Beloved* (Vintage/2004) ISBN 1400033411

Toni Morrison: *The Bluest Eye* (MAXnotes, 2002) ISBN 0-87891-008-5

Recommended textbooks:

Paula Rothenberg. *Invisible Privilege: A Memoir About Race, Class and Gender* (University Press of Kansas/2000) ISBN 0700610049

Johanna W.H.van Wijk-Bos. *Making Wise the Simple – the Torah in Christian Faith and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005)

Paula Giddings. *When and Where I Enter - The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow) ISBN 0688146503

Evaluation

Required readings, reflections and writings and participation in discussions will be the basis for the evaluation of the course. We will also evaluate the course and the reading material together as we proceed with our studies during the two weeks we are in class. See also under *Requirements*.

Cross-cultural experience guidelines

Before we begin with the course *To Know the Heart of the Stranger*, each class participant is asked to engage in a cross-cultural experience. You may seek out the experience on your own or at the most together with one other student in the class. Here follow the rationale and the guidelines for this requirement.

Rationale: The idea that informs the cross-cultural experience is that the biblical mandate “to know the heart of the stranger” can be lived out only if we seriously try to find access to the experience of the stranger. This access can be sought in different ways and found in a variety of sources, including our personal experience. In this class we focus especially on issues of racism and sexism as the two uphold powerful systems and ideologies of dominance and privilege. In seeking out a cross-cultural experience we therefore look to find access to the experience of a group that is marginalized on account of race and sex, and that is “other” than the one to which we ourselves belong; we need to find ourselves strangers within the context we have sought out. The intention is to “flip” as best as we can the situation in which we ordinarily find ourselves.

For those members of the class who already find themselves in a marginalized situation in the classroom because of their race and/or sex, it will be important to find tools to critically reflect on this situation. If your privilege is one of gender rather than color you may seek out a context where that privilege is muted on account of your being a minority; if your privilege is one of class, you may seek out an occasion where that privilege is not shared. Men could visit a group of women only, for example. A middle-class person could seek out an occasion of being with a group that does not have access to the privilege of wealth in America. A citizen can put herself or himself in the context of a group of immigrants. Use your imagination and expand the possibilities. The idea is that you reflect fruitfully on the privilege you automatically are accorded.

* Anyone who has questions or would like to consult about this part of the class requirements, please feel free to contact me via email.

The reflection on the cross-cultural experience needs to be completed before the class begins so we can share the reflections in class.

Guidelines for written reflections on cross-cultural experience

The reflection needs to be written down so it can be read in class. No longer than three pages double-spaced. You are quite free to write in a style that is comfortable for you, but be sure to address the situation from the perspective of your race and sex. It will be especially important to identify how racism and sexism work together to reinforce oppressive ways of behaving and thinking.

In your writing address the following questions:

1. Who experiences privilege in this context and what kind of privilege am I seeing? What specific manifestations of privilege do I observe? Who lacks privilege and what determines this lack?

2. How does the experience highlight the privilege I ordinarily experience? What aspects of my usual privilege are brought to the fore?

3. Do I feel like an outsider and what are the reasons for this feeling? Does the experience help me to understand the dynamics of white male privilege, of white privilege and how does it do so?

4. Where and how does the experience connect with specific readings for the class?

Identity Statement Guidelines

COMPLETE PARTS 1. AND 2. OF THE STATEMENT BEFORE THE COURSE BEGINS

Naming ourselves and our world

1. Name yourself and your reality with detail about your economical, social, cultural, political and religious context. Name your religious context last. Reflect on the privilege and/or power that this context does or does not confer. Identify groups of "natural" and/or chosen alliance.

Naming injustice

2. Articulate perceived areas of injustice in these contexts, i.e. identify groups that lack the privilege and/or power that you have identified under 1. and the causes for this lack. Choose one issue to address in greater detail.

Naming our theology

3. Where do you place yourself in terms of your theology? Be as precise as possible, providing a context in terms of past and present community as well as ideas and beliefs. How does your theology connect with the biblical text? How does your perception of justice intersect with your belief system and your understanding of the Bible within this system?

Naming concerns of race and gender

4. How and where do race and sex enter into your concern about injustice, your theology and your understanding of the biblical text?

Dreaming a future

5. Sketch steps you want to follow in order to work toward a solution of the problem you have identified as the area of your main concern in 2. This scenario does not have to be realistic or practical; it may be the dream you have for a restoration of racial and gender equity.

GUIDELINES FOR LITURGIES IN THE CLASS TO KNOW THE HEART OF THE STRANGER

Procedures: *Your instructor will provide the liturgies for the first and last days. Students are assigned to the other days. If a particular day is not convenient for you, you may switch with another person, notifying the class ahead of time.*

General comment: *Creating a liturgy is not a simple matter and involves work and attention. Therefore, do not put it off until the last minute, or pick a poem to read just before class begins, but give careful thought on what you want to use for openings and closings, and how to integrate your material with the readings and discussions of the day. Try to engage the entire class in the liturgy and look for non-traditional ways of doing so. Song, dance, prayer and readings are only some ways of helping us to focus our thoughts. There are many other possibilities and I urge you to try to be creative and at the same time responsive to the issues with which the class is trying to wrestle.*

Resources

There are many resources available for creating liturgies. They include all the liturgical books by Miriam Therese Winter, Woman Word, Woman Witness, Woman Wisdom, and Woman Prayer, Woman Song. Helpful resources also are: Equal Rites – Lesbian and Gay Worship, Ceremonies, and Celebrations,, Finding words for Worship by Ruth Duck. Good songs may be found in Brian Wren's Piece Together Praise and Shirly Erena Murray's In Every Corner Sing. An excellent resource is also: Wisdom=s Feast - Sophia in Study and Celebration, edited by Susan Cole, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig. Good material may also be found in Dissenting Daughters – Feminist Liturgies in a Global Context, edited by Teresa Berger.

Language

No matter what the resources we use, we will practice using inclusive language both for God and people in our liturgies. Inclusive language for God means that we make use of the rich diversity of both gender bound and non-gendered language available to us in Scripture; it does not mean that we use only neutral language and avoid all pronouns. Male referencing of God and Christ needs to be balanced by female referencing. Because the male references have been so overwhelmingly used in the past, it is also possible to use only female references in order to achieve balance. For guidance in the responsible use of inclusive or expansive language for God, see Johanna W.H.van Wijk-Bos: Reimagining God – The Case for Scriptural Diversity

Time your exercise beforehand so you have an idea as to how much time it will take in class. 5 minutes should be a minimum, 15 mins a maximum of time used for this in-class exercise.

If you have questions, send them to me!

Johanna

