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## Someone Like You

**Texts: Colossians 3: 9-14; Revelation 7: 9-11; “*The Black Prayer*”, by RuNett Nia Ebo (1994)**

When Emily was about six years old, she was starting to learn about the presidents in school. She came to me with a question: “Dad,” she said, “can a girl be the president?” “Yes,” I said immediately, “a girl can be the president. You can be anything you want to be.” “Then why haven’t there been any girls who were president yet?” she asked. That’s a hard question to answer. Yes, a girl can be president, but there are no examples of that in the 44 presidents she was looking at back then. And there still isn’t, at 46. My answer was anything but obvious looking at the pictures of the people who had been president over more than two centuries.

That’s the power of representation, of having someone like you already doing what you want to be able to do. It empowers your imagination to dream that that could be you some day. Over the years, Emily has asked several of those, “Dad, can a girl ... ?” questions. Noah and Adam have never once asked me whether a boy could do something. It just seems obvious to them that a boy can grow up to do or be anything he wants. The world proclaims this every time they look at it. Boys and men are already doing anything they could ever want to do. But it’s not so for Emily. And it’s not so for African Americans, either.

Hank Aaron, the great baseball home run slugger who just passed away a few weeks ago, remembered when he saw Jackie Robinson play in the Major Leagues for the first time. As a young African American child, Aaron remembered thinking, “If he can do it, then so can I. If Jackie Robinson, a black man, can play in the Major Leagues, then I, a black child, can grow up to do that, too.” Representation. Someone like you. It’s extremely powerful.

When talking to his converts in Colossae, Paul is making sure that everyone there understands that they are included in this new Christian faith. He writes, “...there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free; but Christ is all and in all.” This was an extremely powerful thing for Paul to write.

The ancient world was very much divided up into different classes of people who didn’t associate with each other. The Greeks thought of themselves as the most civilized people in the world. They had an intellectual tradition going back hundreds of years. People who were Greek had civilization. People who weren’t were barbaroi to the Greeks, barbarians: that is, people whose language sounded to the Greeks as if they were saying “bar bar bar”, which is where the word comes from. The barbarians returned the compliment, thinking that Greeks were horrible intellectual snobs who thought entirely too highly of themselves. Who’d want anything to do with them? To say that these people belong together was an astonishing statement. But Paul makes it. It was the same with Greeks and Jews. Jews had their laws and kept to themselves. Everyone knew that. Jews wouldn’t eat with Gentiles, and thought of Gentiles as being unclean, and making them unclean. Gentiles generally thought of Jews as anti-social, since they wouldn’t take part in the civic festivals to the gods that everyone else went to. But Paul says, “Nope, in Christ there’s no difference. You both belong here.” It was the same with slaves and free. It would be hard to find two more distinct classes of people: Those who had control over their

own lives and those who didn't. But Paul names them both, includes them both in Christ, says that Christ is just as much in the one as in the other. Are you a slave? You belong. Are you free? You belong. There are people in the church just like you.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul gives us a slightly different list: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Did you catch it? In this list he adds in male and female. Are you included in Christ? Yes, whoever you are, you are included.

The whole New Testament is full of lists of people who belong, who are included. No matter who you are, it seems to be saying, you are represented in one of these lists somewhere. No matter who you are, you belong, and there's someone in the church who is just like you.

What Paul does on a more individual level, the author of Revelation does on a grand scale. Before the throne of God he sees, "A great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." Every nation is represented, every language, all peoples. We're all there. We're all represented. Is Christian faith something for a person like you? Yes, yes it is. Someone like you is already there.

It's so important to insist upon everyone belonging, everyone having an equal place in the Christian faith, that Paul actually has to confront Peter about it in Galatia. Peter had been eating with the Gentiles, treating them as equals, until some people from James came, and then Peter stopped accepting Gentiles as equals. Paul confronted Peter to his face: this isn't how a follower of Jesus acts, and you know it. To his everlasting credit, Peter seems to have taken this rebuke and accepted it, and changed his ways again, back to treating the Gentiles as equal members of the Christian faith. But it was touch and go for a minute there, when Peter seemed to be saying to the Gentiles, "There's no place for someone like you in our fellowship." Paul got him turned around right away on that, because it's so important.

Someone like you. Someone like you, fully equal, fully represented, fully Christian, fully human.

I hope you could hear in RuNett Nia Ebo's poem about Blackness, the feeling of not belonging, of not being like everyone else, of not finding a place for yourself in the midst of the human race. I hope you could hear the cry of the one who is not considered fully equal, fully represented, fully human. "Why is it that you created Someone Like Me?" she asks God. The questioning of God, the longing to know why the Black person must be considered one down in everything, on the short end of the stick just because their skin is black, hated for nothing but their skin color: it's all there. The poet is on the outside looking in, asking the question of why God made someone like her, as a Black person. The world seems to say, "not good enough, not acceptable, less." The triumphant answer from God rebuts the world's assumptions: no matter what the world says, you are beautiful, you are treasured, valuable, special to me. You are made in my image, just as much as anyone else. Paul would very much approve. In Christ there is no Black or white.

Part of what we are doing with Black History Month is making sure that Black people are represented in history, making sure that their role is fully acknowledged. As Christians, we understand from Paul and Revelation and so many other texts that it's important for people of all races to feel like they can find someone like them in the stories we tell, and in the way that we identify ourselves. Black people

have been excluded from so much of the so-called normal history, which is usually history from the white (and male) point of view. That's why it's important that we remember the *White Lion*, the ship that brought the first African slaves to America in 1619, alongside the *Mayflower*, which arrived with the Pilgrims in 1620.

That's why it's important for us to remember free black settlers like Anthony Johnson, a black Angolan who achieved wealth in 17<sup>th</sup> century Virginia as a property owner before his death in 1670.

We can think of Black scientists like George Washington Carver, who was born a slave in 1864, but rose to become a major inventor specializing in products from peanuts, including dyes, plastics and gasoline. His inventions revolutionized the economy of the South.

We remember Harriet Tubman, not just for her work on the Underground Railroad, but also as a spy for the Union forces. It's only this year that she was finally incorporated into the United States Military Intelligence Corps Hall of Fame.

We remember Rosa Parks, who stood up for Civil Rights by sitting down, and we remember Mae Jemison, who was the first black woman to fly into space, inspired by seeing Lieutenant Uhuru on a spaceship in the original Star Trek.

Seeing someone like you doing something enables you to imagine yourself doing it. Paul knew that long ago, as did the other Bible writers. We know that today whenever our children still ask, "Can a person like me do that? Can a black person become president?" "Yes, yes they can. Just look at Barack Obama!" Representation matters. Remembering and celebrating people like you who have accomplished things, who have belonged, matters.

When we remember Black history, we take up the mantle from people like Paul and the writer of Revelation, and we recognize the full humanity, the full belonging, the full ability of Black people as people made in the image of God, called by Christ to be one with him, just as we are, one with us. Does Someone Like You belong here? Yes, yes you do. History and the Bible say you do. Amen