

Power, Race, and Defining 'Taking a Knee'

Micah 2: 1-11

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October 1, 2017

In this passage, the prophet Micah speaks out against premeditated wickedness. People lay in their beds at night plotting in their minds how they'll oppress and exploit other people, how they'll steal from other people. When the morning comes, they carry out their nefarious schemes and get away with them because, "it is in their power."

The prophet condemns the people who use their power unjustly, telling them that when God takes action against them, they'll lament bitterly. But the people to whom the prophet speaks interrupt him: "Do not preach...one should not preach of such things. We will not be disgraced."

Undeterred, the prophet continues. Anticipating Jack Nicholson's famous line, he basically tells them, you can't handle the truth! You can't handle the truth because the truth convicts you of the sin of oppressing and exploiting other people. Instead, you prefer empty falsehoods about fun and good times, wine and strong drink. You want someone to comfort you with lies that make you feel good while you oppress, exploit and steal. But you can't distort and avoid reality forever. The truth will convict you.

It's not about race, Donald Trump said. The controversy over taking a knee during the national anthem, it's not about race.

Even though those who are taking a knee repeatedly say, it *is* about race—it's about racism, racial inequality, and police violence against African Americans—Donald Trump said, it's not about race.

Herein lays an interesting dynamic—the power to define what taking a knee is about. The African Americans taking a knee say, it's about race. The white man living in the White House says, it's not about race.

Who has the power to define what taking a knee is about? The African Americans, for whom this is a way to express, in a non-violent and public manner, their legitimate grievance against racism? Or the white man, who says African Americans are only disrespecting his flag and nation, a nation where the white race has historically been, and currently is, dominant over African Americans?

Who has the power to define the meaning of taking a knee?

The power to define gets to the very heart of the reality of race and power in the United States of America.

The power to define reality. Reality is what we say it is, not what they say it is.

The power to define who we and our people are, and the power to define who they and their people are. We are this, but they are that.

The power to define the past. This is what happened in the past, and this is how it happened. This is what we will remember. This is what we will teach. This is what we will celebrate. This is the history that matters. These are the people who mattered. And this is what

and who we will discount or forget.

And the power to define the present and the future. This is what's happening now, and this is how things will be.

The power to define is so important because it is so powerful. The power to define gives you power to maintain your dominance over others. Or conversely, the power to define gives you power to free yourself from the dominance others have over you. Those with more power don't want those with less power to gain or exercise the power to define.

Who has the power to define the meaning of taking a knee?

It's not about race, Donald Trump said. He was partly right. But only in the sense that it's not just about race. It's about race and power. For when Donald Trump wields the power to define taking a knee by saying, it's not about race, while the African Americans taking a knee say, *it is* about race, Trump is himself combining race and power in a manner that's intended to dominate, which is the very definition of racism. It's the white man who will define what African Americans are doing, because it's in the white man's power.

And here's how the white man is defining what African Americans are doing: African Americans are disrespecting his nation's flag.

It wasn't all that long ago that a white man could accuse an African American man of disrespecting a white woman, just by the way he looked at her or didn't tip his hat. And the white man could strip and lynch the African American man.

Now a white man is accusing African American men of disrespecting his flag, just by taking a knee, and telling team owners to strip them of their employment.

Race and power.

Race and power is just one of our nation's enduring struggles.

Class and power is another.

Gender and power.

Sexual orientation and power.

In this country, white people, rich people, men, and straight people have been the dominant ones. They've been the ones who've held most of the power, who've done most of the defining, who've benefitted the most, and who continue to benefit the most.

People of color, poor people, women, and people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer have long struggled in this country for freedom, equality and justice. They struggle to this day for the power to define who they are, and for the power to define why they are struggling.

And like the prophet Micah, they've faced a chorus of more powerful people saying to them, "one should not preach of such things." You cannot say that! You cannot do that! You cannot take a knee, because when you take a knee, you disrespect the dominant order, a dominant order in which you are subordinate. You cannot even define why you are taking a knee, because when you do, you challenge the power I have over you.

It's not about race, Donald Trump said.

An empty falsehood—a lie—spoken by a defender of unjust power. May the truth convict all who propagate such lies, all who defend unjust power. And may those who struggle for equality and justice prevail.