

Gospel Matthew 15:(10-20) 21-28

¹⁰Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: ¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” ¹²Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” ¹³He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” ¹⁵But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” ¹⁶Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

²¹Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” ²³But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” ²⁴He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

And Yet, She Persisted!

August 20, 2017

I recall hearing someone say, “I’ve never regretted keeping my mouth shut.” I try to remember that but often, fail to do so. And I’m guessing Jesus might be thinking that this morning, wanting to take some of those words back if he could. This may be one of the most upsetting images of Jesus that we encounter in all the of the Gospel stories. To be honest, Jesus treats the Canaanite woman like, well, a jerk, at best. He is rude, calls her a dog,(maybe just a puppy dog) ignores her, and almost sends her away as his disciples encouraged him. He has just told everyone that it is not what goes into your mouth that defiles a person but what comes out of it and here he goes saying something that is about as unkind as you can imagine and to a woman whose child is ill no less. Not the loving, compassionate, always ready to heal or cast out evil spirits Jesus, that we expect.

It may be that he is exhausted after the many encounters he’s had over the last couple of chapters. Feeding thousands, walking on water, grieving the death of John, arguing with the Pharisees and a host of other activities. I suppose we could give him a bit of slack. This story certainly reminds us that Jesus is human. That he tires and wearies like the rest of us and sometimes he needs to be challenged and taught about what God’s love is all about. Today the Canaanite woman gives Jesus a lesson in perseverance and courage, reminding him of the very thing that he has been preaching to others all this time. Maybe Jesus forgot his own story?

And it is also a story that is, as I look across the landscape of our current society, timeless. How relevant is this story as we walk through these turbulent times together? It seems that the idea that some people think they are superior to others has no limits and no society or generation seems to have escaped its ugly sinfulness. It is a sinfulness that appears in the very first pages of our story where Cain, who thinks his offerings are better than his brother’s, kills him in a fit of anger. Even the disciples argue over who will sit on Jesus’ right and left in the Kingdom.

And so, I can't help but make connections and parallels to the events of this past week, where White Supremacists and Neo Nazis and the KKK and others, gathered together to chant, "Jews will not replace us!" spreading hate and violence with the message that they are the superior race, and all others should go home or back where they came from. It is difficult for us to confront our own sense of racism both within and without the church and yet, we cannot turn a blind eye or sit in silence. Our love for Jesus and his love for us compels us to think, to question, to learn, to change, to bear his love into all the world, and also, to confront evil and hatred, sometimes with our very lives. The Presbyterian Church USA denounces this racism and hatred and I've included the response of our denomination as an insert in your bulletin today which I hope will encourage and strengthen your faith. We all have some soul searching to do and I hope that you will do that.

In this encounter with the Canaanite woman today Jesus and the disciples come face-to-face with their own racism and prejudice and fortunately for us, they learn and change and healing takes place. Jesus got what I call 'schooled' in this passage. By that, I mean, that often in my encounters with others whether they are confessing Christians or not, I am often taught by them about what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

And today I think that is pretty much what happens to the very human Jesus. And of course, we are troubled to think that Jesus may not know everything and that there is nothing he has to learn, but that would deny his humanity. And I think even in the early chapters of Luke there is something about Jesus growing and learning as he was in the temple one day. He increased in wisdom and years, and I would like to believe that he continued to do that.

He grew up with parents and culture just like we have done, and that cultural history which was deeply religious, deeply Jewish, had to have conditioned his thinking and shaped who he understood himself to be as God's anointed one. He got schooled by the Canaanite woman and was reminded of the bigger picture of God's purpose, not only for Jesus, but for God's Chosen people, which was to be a blessing to all nations. Not some nations as they began to believe it. Not just the Jewish nations, but All nations, and this was what Jesus was called to do.

That Jesus changed his mind here should come as no surprise and I don't think it is without precedent. He is doing what his Father did. I distinctly remember a story about a man called Abram who talked God out of destroying the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah if he could find a few righteous folks. And there is the story of Noah in Genesis 9 and the promise to never again flood the earth and never again to cut off all flesh by a flood and he makes a covenant with Noah using a rainbow as a sign. And there was Jacob who wrestled with an Angel and wouldn't let go until he was blessed.

Jesus got wrestled with, and he changed his mind, and I think he understood that his mission and purpose was far greater than even he imagined, that through him all the world would be blessed; all the earth would be saved. That Jesus remembered those covenantal words from Genesis 12 where God tells Abram "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. "Blessed to be a Blessing", is how we say it. That all those who seek will find and all are welcome in the kingdom.

And I can't help but be wondering how have we, the Church of Jesus Christ, become like those in our story who would rather send people away? How are we looking at the world and the diverse people in it and making judgments about who is in and who is out? The woman in our story this morning is not a Jew and she is not a Christian and she was considered unclean and a sinner. Someone who had no business coming to Jesus and making such a bold request. That she does so without any other male presence would be considered highly taboo in this culture. And maybe part of this story is being used by Matthew to highlight the conversation that just occurred between Jesus and the Pharisees and disciples about what is considered clean and unclean.

She is the “other” in the story, and yet, she persists and grabs hold of Jesus and wrestles with him to give her the justice and healing that he so readily speaks of. And I don’t think we have to look very far to see all those ‘others’ in the world that are asking the same of us. And I guess the question is, will you send them away? Or will you extend the healing love of God to all peoples and nations?

The Right Reverend Michael Curry, presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church and previous Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina, tells the story of a young woman who became an Episcopalian in the 1940s. One Sunday, she invited a man she had been dating to join her at morning services. Both of them were African American, but the church they attended that day was all white, and right in the heart of segregated America. The young man waited in the pews while the congregation went forward to receive communion, anxious because he noticed that everyone in the congregation was drinking from the same chalice.

He had never seen black and white drink from the same water fountain, much less the same cup. His eye stayed on his girlfriend as, after receiving the bread, she waited for the cup. Finally, the priest lowered it to her lips and said, as he had to the others, “The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life.” The man decided that any church where black and white drank from the same cup had discovered something powerful, something he wanted to be a part of. The couple was Bishop Curry’s parents.

How must we consider this story today in light of the many conflicts in the world where there is ethnic and racial division not only here but around the world? Where people are considered unclean and unloved?

How must we think about this story in light of all those who are trying to cross our borders to live a decent life? Would Jesus be saying to them “I’ve only come to save the lost sheep of America? The lost sheep of those who believe the right things about me? The lost sheep who have a certain color of skin?”

How are we to apply the deep truths of this story to those in our Christian community who are gay, lesbian, Bi, or Transgender? What if all these, like the Canaanite woman, who was despised, rejected, vulnerable and desperate, come to Jesus? Should we beg Jesus to send them away? I think honestly, some of our brothers and sisters would do that. In fact, we hear it almost daily of some church who chooses to do that. This is how some in Christ’s church are responding. They don’t seem to want to follow Jesus’ lead. They seem to think that the color of your skin and the language you speak make you inferior to them.

Now I know these are divisive issues and we all have our feelings and thoughts about them. They are never clear cut or easy; sometimes filled with shades of gray. But if you are a follower of Jesus, then those opinions, I hope, will be seen through the lens of how Jesus responds to “Others” and not just through your personal fears or biases. And certainly not through some misguided interpretation of an Old Testament God who would rather smite you from the face of the earth. If we are truly followers of Jesus, then he gets the last word, and that word is Love. A love that grows, learns, adapts, changes, challenges, persists, and holds on.

And so, I challenge you today, to hear the story differently and perhaps consider what this story sounds like if we change the characters a bit. What does this story sound like if it begins like this?

A woman from Guatemala...came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David. My son cannot live here without being drawn into drugs and violence and he will die!”

A woman from Syria...called out in her despair, “Have mercy on me, Lord, for my child, is dying of thirst and hunger and war is killing us!”

A man from the trailer park down the road...crawled up to Jesus and said, “Lord, have mercy on me. I can’t find work and my family is hungry”

A lesbian from Asheville...lonely and excluded cries out, "Save me Lord, for I am sinking and so afraid."

A gay couple from Spruce Pine...who have no community to share their faith with cry out, "Jesus, use us in your kingdom."

A prisoner from down the road...cries out in a lonely cell, "Jesus, forgive me and bring me into your kingdom."

What if they all fell before the feet of Jesus and said: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat crumbs that fall from their masters' table." What is your response? Will we ask Jesus to send them away or welcome them?

And finally, aren't we too the Canaanite woman? All of us? Isn't it just as likely that we too come as the outsiders to the Kingdom? How wonderful and disturbing is that? And isn't that the good news? That little ole puppy dogs like you and me get into the kingdom! And shouldn't we be so grateful for that, that we would not only sit at the master's feet with wagging tails, but also run out into the countryside and invite all those "others" who are hungry of spirit, and thirsty in their souls, all those seeking healing and justice, to come to the one who will welcome them into the family! That they too might hear Jesus say, "Great is your faith! Let it be done as you wish." Thanks be to God! Amen.