

8-20-17 Sermon: “A Savior Who is Willing to be Wrong” – Matthew 15:21-28

What on *earth* is Jesus thinking?

I don't know about you, but that's what I find myself wondering after our Gospel reading this morning. Is this the same Jesus who teaches us to love our neighbors as ourselves? The same Jesus who goes out of his way to heal the sick, to teach and even feed the crowds? Yes friends, this is Jesus, the very Son of God, blows off the Canaanite woman and calls her names before she finally convinces him to heal her daughter.

“Jesus!” I want to say, “What's the matter with you?! You are not acting very God-like right now!”

It would be a bit of an understatement to say that this story is a difficult text for the church. Christians through the ages have responded to this text with similar dismay, and many have tried to offer explanations for why Jesus responds to this woman the way he does. Some have suggested that Jesus is ‘testing’ the woman, to see how great her faith really is. Some have argued over the Greek word translated ‘dog’ in the story we just heard, trying to make it nicer, translating it ‘little doggie’. Others have pointed to the fact that this woman is a Gentile and have argued that Jesus the Jewish Messiah is reminding her that his mission to Israel must come first, before he expands the Gospel to those of us on the outside, who are Gentiles.

There is perhaps some truth worth hearing in each of these explanations. But for me, none of them satisfy. In the end, we are still faced with the fact that Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior of all Creation, refuses to heal a little girl possessed by a demon and calls her desperate mother a you-know-what!

It's true that Jesus does not sound very God-like in this text. And maybe that's the point. We church-folks tend to talk a lot about the divinity of Jesus, the fact that Jesus is God. But as Christians, we also affirm the humanity of Jesus. As our foremothers and forefathers wrote the early creeds of our faith, they found it important to articulate that Jesus is fully God and fully human at the same time.

And indeed, in this encounter with the Canaanite woman, Jesus shares with us in both the beauty and the treachery of our humanity. And friends, precisely *because* Jesus is just as human as you and as me, he sets an example of how we might be humanity at our best.

The story of the Canaanite woman is a story about a conversation, a debate. Jesus gets in many such debates and ‘contests of words’ over the course of his ministry. Satan tempts him in the wilderness: “If you are the son of God, turn these stones into bread,” and Jesus retorts, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” The Pharisees try to trick Jesus with a question about paying taxes, and Jesus responds, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but give to God what is God's.”

In every instance except for this one, Jesus gets the quick-witted response, the punch-line. He's the one who teaches, and everyone else learns. But, in this story, the roles are reversed. It is the Canaanite woman who gets the last word, who is the teacher. She says, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.”

There's something else we need to remember about this Canaanite woman: she is an outsider, different from Jesus in nearly every way. He is a Jew; she is a Gentile. He is a man; she is a woman. He is from Israel, she is from the borderlands. Nearly everything about them – gender, ethnicity, heritage, religion, life experience – separate them from one another. This Canaanite woman is the quintessential “other” when placed next to Jesus. And yet, she is the

only person in the Gospels who teaches Jesus. The text tells us that Jesus is moved by her faith and heals her daughter.

If I understand the text, this Canaanite woman doesn't just touch Jesus' heart or impress him with her faith; she changes his mind. She teaches him, reminds him, just how big God's Kingdom is – big enough to cross any boundary line we may be tempted to draw. Big enough to include them both. And in response, Jesus does something so human it may shock us; he admits that he was wrong. He listens, he learns, he changes his mind, and he heals her daughter.

This is not just a momentary change, either; Jesus' encounter changes the course of his ministry. The very next thing Jesus does is to go to the crowds of Gentiles that begin to surround him and heal *them*, too. And then, Jesus as Jesus feed over 5,000 Jewish people just a few weeks ago, he goes on to feed over 4,000 Gentiles. If this story of the Canaanite woman and the Very Human Jesus teaches us anything, it is about the transformative power of relationships.

Jesus comes to us in this text as fully human, as humanity at its best. He models for us, reluctantly at first, a willingness to engage in conversation with someone who pushes him outside of his comfort zone, and ultimately, a willingness to be transformed. Jesus messes up. He gets it wrong. But eventually, he listens. He admits he was wrong, and he changes. And he continues to live according to that change for the rest of his ministry.

Friends, it is *hard* to live like that, isn't it? How often do we find ourselves in a transformative conversation or relationship with someone who is different from us, someone from whom we initially might think we have nothing to learn? Think about the people with whom you spend time, think about the conversations you have together. So many of us, myself included, live most days in echo-chambers that reinforce our own beliefs and feelings and identities, until we truly do not understand how anyone could possibly disagree, could possibly see the world another way, or expose us to something we've never experienced before.

Jesus took a risk; he travelled toward Gentile territory, toward the borderlands where he might encounter someone who is different. Do we do that in our day-to-day lives? Or do we find ourselves sitting down squarely in the center of our safe worlds, circles impenetrable to the dissenting voice of a Canaanite woman. Safe from relationships that might transform us, might change our minds or our hearts.

Now, in light of recent events, I want to be abundantly clear about what I am *not* trying to say. I am not saying that we are always wrong and need to have our minds changed. I am not saying that a 'middle road' between what I believe and what my neighbor believes is always the right way. I am not saying that every single instance of genuine listening will change the beliefs and actions of one or both people. Nor do I necessarily think it should.

Many places in our lives are composed of gray areas, but there are sometimes when there *is* a clear-cut right and wrong. The obvious example that comes to my mind, the elephant in our nation's living room, is what happened in Charlottesville last Saturday. In instances like this and other hate crimes, where love is directly juxtaposed with hate, we simply and unapologetically must choose love. Do not pass go, do not collect \$200. Any ideology like white supremacy or Nazism, that seeks to kill, harm, and destroy other people – people who our faith reminds us are created in God's own image – is fundamentally opposed to Christianity and the God we meet in Jesus Christ. The sheer enormity of Christ's love leaves no room for hate.

In fact, I'm inclined to believe that the inability to listen to and be transformed by people who are 'other' is exactly what creates that kind of hate and evil in the first place. When we have genuine relationships with one another, genuine enough that we are willing to be transformed by

them, willing to admit to them when we are wrong, willing to change our minds and our actions based on what we learn from someone else; then we find that we simply cannot hate them.

Friends, there is no force on this earth that transforms us as profoundly as our relationships. There is nothing else quite so effective at softening those hardened places within us, at breathing the very breath of the Holy Spirit into our lungs, as looking into the eyes of another human being, feeling the touch of their hand, hearing their voices as they tell us their story, share their deepest joys and sorrows.

I wonder, if the man who drove his car into a crowd of counter-protestors last Saturday, if any of the people who shouted, “You will not replace us” and “Jews will not replace us.”...I wonder what would have happened if any one of them had decided to spend one day with someone who is black or Jewish; Hispanic or Native or Asian American. What if they had broken bread together, shared in prayer together before the meal? What if they had had a genuine conversation, and listened to one another talk about their families, their joys, and their struggles? I wonder, after a genuine encounter and experience of shared humanity with someone who is different, if any of those marchers might have changed their mind, might have decided not to go to Charlottesville last weekend.

I wonder, if any members of the notorious Westboro Baptist Church, with their signs that read, “God hates gays,” and “God hates soldiers”...I wonder what would happen if any of them sat down to dinner with someone who is gay, or someone who serves our country in the armed forces. What if they committed, just for an hour or two, to open up their hearts and their minds with the humility and willingness to listen that Jesus demonstrates in our Gospel lesson. I wonder if it would call their beliefs and actions into question. I wonder if they might put down their signs and walk away.

I wonder, if those people who take to social media to pronounce with words of utter scorn and hate their condemnation for ‘Trump voters’, or ‘Obama voters’, ‘Hillary voters’, ‘Bernie bros’...I wonder what would happen if they were to meet in a hospital waiting room, just waiting to hear if their loved ones are ok. I wonder what would happen, if, to pass the time and keep anxiety at bay, they shared stories about the loved ones they were there for. I wonder, after that experience, if it would be so easy for them to talk about “all conservatives” or “all liberals” with such utter disdain.

I say ‘I wonder,’ because I do not know. Maybe they would be changed...maybe they wouldn’t. I do not pretend to know or fully understand how and why transformation takes place. But if I’ve heard any Word from God in the Gospel lesson this morning, it is this: When it comes to transforming one another – when it comes to being transformed ourselves – relationships are the best chance we’ve got.

Our Lord has shown us not only the divine, but humanity at its best. He has set us an imperfect, human example that we imperfect human disciples *can* follow. So friends, let us go and do likewise. Thanks be to God. Amen.