

11th Sunday after Pentecost
August 20, 2017
Matthew 15:[10-20] 21-28
The Rev. Carenda Baker

It's been quite a week in the news, hasn't it? My heart and mind and spirit have felt jostled to and fro the entire week. I didn't hear the details of the events that occurred in Charlottesville last Friday and Saturday until later in the day last Sunday. It's been a challenge to stay centered and prayerful. I'm guessing you have experienced the daily news this week similarly – lots of ups & downs: glimmers of hope and gladness at some points, and also intense moments of anger, sadness, and anxiety, and perhaps even a hint of despair.

We need to be intentional about staying spiritually grounded in God in these troubled and troubling days. It is extremely helpful to pause, to breathe, to slow down our racing minds and bodies so that we can think clearly. As people of faith, we need to remind ourselves and each other where our "True North" is, the magnetic center point that will always lead us directly to the heart of God, source of all truth and love. For those of us who are baptized Christians, that faithful, steady compass point, our True North is Jesus. When we are tossed about by constant chaos, feeling restless and anxious, the place to turn is back to Jesus, the one whose disciples we are. Reconnecting with our Lord will reorient and help settle us.

We have in today's gospel a key moment in Jesus' life and ministry. The key moments in Jesus' adult life were transformative to his identity – his baptism, being tempted in the wilderness by Satan, his transfiguration on the mountain, the Last Supper he shared with the disciples, praying in the Garden of Gethsemane that the cup of suffering might pass from him, his crucifixion, death, and resurrection.

Today's gospel story from Matthew is less familiar to us, but it is no less a transforming experience for Jesus. This story about Jesus and the Canaanite woman can leave many readers and even biblical interpreters feeling uncomfortable and unsettled. Some commentators have tried to sanitize this exchange, free it from its blunt and unvarnished humanity. The discomfort is that Jesus doesn't look so good in this story. Is he just grumpy? Did he not get enough sleep the night before? Jesus here is out of synch with the usual compassionate, caring, attentive man we imagine he must have been, 24/7, seven days a week. But if we take seriously the truth of the incarnation, God coming to us in human form, then this is about as real and human as it gets. Jesus is dismissive and rude to a woman he meets for the first time.

He has been rubbing elbows with many people, who have all sorts of needs. The hungry needing to be fed. The sick needing healing and restored health. The ones close to him, his disciples, needing reassurance that the God in whom they have put their faith can be trusted, even in the midst of sudden storms. Debating with the Pharisees and scribes over his disciples' piety practices. Jesus is surely tired, and needs at least a little time to himself.

So he leaves Gennesaret in the area of Galilee with the disciples and travels north into Syrian territory, to the towns of Tyre and Sidon. He is approached there by a "Canaanite" woman, as Matthew describes her. That term would not have been used in Jesus' day, but Matthew wants to give a clear picture of this woman who approaches Jesus. Matthew stirs up the memory of a once "real and present danger" early in Jewish history. Canaanites had been fierce enemies of Israel when the nation was forming. So not only is this stranger approaching Jesus a Gentile, and a woman, she is one of "them", a descendant of an old Jewish nemesis. An unwelcome "outsider".

Jesus did not notice her, and even though she was shouting at him, he ignored her. Didn't respond at all. The disciples, like they had done with that huge hungry crowd of 5,000 people, tell Jesus to send her away. Her shouting is annoying them; and frankly, it's becoming a little embarrassing. Of course the woman wants something. Was there ever a time people didn't want something from him? Jesus responds to the disciples urging him to send her away, and the woman overhears him say, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, I was not sent to care for your kind. My mission has clear parameters. My ministry is only for "our kind", the Jewish people.

The woman has been noisy and assertive, bothering the disciples. Now that she has at least a smidgeon of Jesus' attention, she begins to plead, putting herself in a compliant and humble posture, kneeling in front of him. "Lord help me." His reply is curt and rude. "It is not good to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Has he now just compared her to a dog?

In Jesus' culture, dogs were not kept inside homes as pets. They stayed outside the living area, and scrounged for what they could find to eat. If they were fed, it would be scraps thrown outside to them. But in other cultures dogs did stay indoors with the family. Most of us have seen how excited dogs get, how they hover, weaving around and under the table when humans sit down to eat, ready and waiting for the tiniest tasty morsel to drop! The dog lives inside, and is treated like a family member.

With Jesus' stinging reply, the desperate woman changes her tactics yet again, and now offers Jesus a clever and confrontational response. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs

eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." The dogs which live inside as part of the family are welcomed at least to eat the fallen leftover crumbs.

It is an "aha" moment for Jesus. She's a Gentile, a woman, and a Canaanite – descendant of ancient enemy. And she is also a mother. She was not asking anything for herself. She asks for her demon-afflicted daughter. Anything given to her will immediately be given to her daughter. She will give as she receives and be a conduit for her child. She is really Jesus' kind of woman.

"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. John Shea notes, "This woman's great faith is not about her belief in God. Nor is it about turning to God in fervent prayer, pleading for relief from a terrible situation of suffering. We don't know what her spiritual beliefs or practices were. Neither her religious beliefs nor her piety explain why she has "great faith". Truth be told, her great faith is that she is a tiger, determined to get what she needs from Jesus."

Jesus is moved and changed by this woman. His vision is expanded ever wider to see the abundance of God's grace, as God speaks through this woman searching for mercy in a demon-ridden world. Little things like ethnic difference, patriarchal tradition, and even history of hatred between their peoples will not stand in her way.

In further commentary, John Shea writes: "Great faith is the persistent creativity to bring about the good. Great faith belongs to all of us when we remind each other of the deeper truth of who we are, and compassion flows from us into situations where it is deeply needed".

The outsider, the Canaanite woman helps Jesus become more fully who God intends him to be, the Lord of love and justice who pushed beyond human made boundaries to share God's love. God has no categories that divide people into us and them, deserving and undeserving.

So then - what about us? Can we humbly learn and grow and change? How willingly do we welcome those teachable moments and let our hearts and spirits be stretched wider by the Spirit in order to learn from others, to receive and share more of the boundless love of God? After the events of last weekend, we need the message of surprising possibility and persistent hope in this encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman of great faith!

Jim Wallis, the executive director of the Sojourners community has written that racism is America's original sin. The sins of racism, hatred and violence affect every one of us individually, and all of us as members of the one human race. The hard part is that this truth must be spoken and its reality acknowledged before healing can begin.

While there have been positive changes in our nation from the time of the Civil War, to desegregation, to the civil rights movement led by Dr. King and others, it is senseless and perpetuates an untruth to deny the fact that this cancer of racism still remains deeply and stubbornly imbedded in our identity as a nation, and in all our systems – economic, educational, government, justice, religious.

When I was in graduate school at Pitt, I had a course in clinical social work practice with African American families. Perhaps I shouldn't have been, but I was dumbfounded and shaken by the things I learned in that class. Here was a side of history that I had never heard before. I had a hard time wrapping my head around the appalling truth that millions of women and men from the continent of Africa were involuntarily taken from their homes to be bought and sold as property and used as free slave labor to drive the economy of this "New World". Families were torn apart. The slave trade was the economic engine that made possible greater acquisition of goods, the development of commerce and land expansion, and the strengthening of the power of whites to dominate and rule.

Do you know Wall Street in New York City, the nerve center of the stock market today in this country, was literally a "walled street" to prevent merchants from seeing the commercial slave trade happening there? It is no wonder that the threads of grief, separation, and loss are woven into the history and fabric of African American people's lives. Those same threads are present for Jewish people as a result of the atrocities of the Holocaust. Always, always there are stories either that we have not been told, or are just too horrendous and painful to accept.

So how do we open ourselves up to learning the stories we have never before heard from our neighbors? Clinical social worker and author Brene Brown offers a framework to help uncover our own blind spots and ignorance about racism. She calls this framework the "3 P's": perspective-taking, assessing our use of power, and acknowledging our white privilege. Perspective taking is exactly what I think Jesus was doing with the Canaanite woman. She resisted his intention to avoid engaging with her. But he at least was willing, prodded on by her relentlessness, to continue speaking with her. This opened the way for him to better understand her experience as a mother carrying the burden of a demon-possessed child. Jesus must have begun to sense her desperation, her shame, her isolation, and her total commitment to persisting until she found the help and healing her daughter needed.

When it came to power, Jesus used his power for her, rather than over her to control her. Jesus was a Jewish man, a product of his day and time, influenced by the prejudices and the boundaries that had been drawn and perpetuated in his culture. He could have walked away and refused to help her. But he crosses the boundary and offers healing for her child, and new and restored life to both of them.

And what about his position of privilege? Jesus gave privilege up when he became a human being. The hymn to Christ in the letter to the Philippians says: "Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross."

This is the one, this Jesus who emptied himself is our model, pointing to true north. Let us pray for strength to follow him in risking face to face encounter, and for humility to be respectful listeners and learners. Jesus has drawn wide the circle of God's love for all by his arms outstretched on the cross. Nourished and sustained by Christ who took on our vulnerability, may his life-giving Spirit of compassion flow through us into the places and to the people who need it most.

Let us pray:

Most merciful Lord, your love compels us to come in. Our hands are unclean, our hearts are unprepared. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table. But you, Lord, are the God of our salvation, and share your bread with sinners. So cleanse and feed us with the precious body and blood of your Son, that we may dwell in him and he in us. Hasten the day when all people will sit and eat together in your eternal kingdom as one beloved community. *Amen.*