

Proper 15A
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Matthew 15:10-28

DOG? OR GOD'S CHILD?

A couple of months ago I inadvertently walked out of a store with some merchandise in my hands that I hadn't paid for. I stopped for a moment in shock. Then I turned around, walked back into the store, walked to a counter and paid for the merchandise. I apologized for accidentally shoplifting. The clerk said, "No problem." And I continued on my way. This is white privilege.

Not too long ago I was at a church for a call committee meeting. They emphasized that they wanted a regular pastor to come. I said, "Define what you mean by 'regular'?" They said, "You know." And I said, "No. I don't get what you are asking." They said, "Just a regular pastor." Their eyes were pleading with me to not ask further questions. But I said again, "Define this." And it came out that what they really wanted was a white heterosexual male pastor. This is white heterosexual male privilege.

I cannot read today's gospel without thinking of these two recent events in my life. I cannot read today's gospel without Charlottesville and all the hateful words and actions that have occurred since Charlottesville – and of course – before Charlottesville. I cannot read Jesus' words, "*It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles ... What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles,*" without hearing the horrible racist commentary coming from many people this past week – including the president of the United States. I cannot read the story of the interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman in today's gospel without realizing my own complicity in racism and sexism and the alienation of any who are not like me.

Anyone else agree?

When this Canaanite woman, who sadly does not have a name that was remembered, when she challenges Jesus in today's gospel, Jesus at first minimizes her suffering, ignores her plea and calls her a dog. He tells her, "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" In today's language that would be, "I was sent only to people like me. You're not like me. Leave me alone." We cannot sugarcoat it. Jesus rejects and insults this woman.

Now, I could give you some background on maybe why he reacted this way. I'm sure you all remember the Canaanites from the Old Testament. The Canaanites were the people the Israelites conquered in the Promised Land. Canaanites were the enemies of Israel, the ones God commanded the Israelites to exterminate because their sins were so extreme that contact with them, especially through inter-marriage, would lead Israel into idolatry and immorality. So you see, this Canaanite woman was not merely a gentile, she was an enemy of Israel and an enemy of God and it was right for her to be called a dog ... right?

No. This history does not let Jesus off the hook. Hasn't he just shown us that he will feed 5000 plus people on a hillside? Hasn't he just demonstrated that he will save those foolish to jump out of perfectly good boats? Didn't we hear a few weeks ago Jesus commanding his disciples, "*The kingdom of heaven has come near. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons...*"

Aah, but wait. If you look at the full verse where he says this - in Matthew 10 starting with verse 5 – He prefaces his command by saying, *“Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons ...’”*

Interesting. So here we are in Matthew 15 and Jesus is doing something he said not to do. He is now among his enemy people – the Samaritans, the gentiles. And perhaps he’s uncomfortable. Perhaps he’s out of his comfort zone. Perhaps he’s looking at “them” verses “us.” And this woman starts shouting at him, *“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”*

And he reacts like maybe we have reacted, when we have been confronted by someone not like us – not like us in gender or sex or color or socio-economic status or education level or whatever – he reacts in fear, in anxiety, in disregard. *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel,”* he tells her.

But she doesn’t – will not – give up. *“Lord, have mercy,”* she begs. And Jesus (in forgetting his own words about what goes into a mouth and what goes out of a mouth and what actually defiles) says to her, *“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”* But the Canaanite woman stands her ground. The life of her daughter is at stake. She picks up his words and throws them right back: *“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”*

When Jesus hears this, he says, *“Woman, great is your faith!”* But do you notice that she hasn’t made any confession of faith. She has simply spoken the truth: the truth that has even reached the areas of Tyre and Sidon: children have been fed – 5000 men, besides women and children. She knows what Jesus can do. She clearly is stating, *“Surely there are some crumbs left – even after you feed 5000 plus - for me and my daughter.”*

And Jesus listens. Suddenly Jesus’ world view cracks open. For suddenly the kingdom of God is not only for those “like him” but for all nations – for all gentiles, for even Canaanites, for us. Jesus heals this woman’s daughter. Instantly scripture says. And there is more.

At the end of chapter 15 a strange event occurs. There is another miraculous feeding of the multitudes. This time 4000 men are fed – besides women and children – and there are seven baskets left over. But this time Jesus doesn’t feed the “lost tribes of Israel.” Instead, this time Jesus feeds the gentiles – the “other,” the enemy, the lost, the hungry ... men and women and children. And all become one in Christ.

From chapter 15 onward Jesus is not just the savior of the Israel tribes. He becomes the Savior of all – Canaanites included. As you recall, in Matthew 25, Jesus tells the well-known story of the sheep and the goats where the king says, *“Truly I tell you, just as you fed and welcomed and clothed all those in need, you did it to me.”*

And, after Jesus’ resurrection he commands his disciples, *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”* All nations. All people. All walks of life. Even, especially those we consider the lost, the least, the thrown away, the Canaanites!

What will it take today for us to have our world views cracked open? How can we honestly confront and take responsibility for our actions and reactions that are completely at odds with following Jesus Christ? This isn't about being politically correct. It is about following Jesus – following Jesus as he moves from healing and saving the lost sheep of Israel to healing and saving all people – perhaps even the goats, certainly the Canaanites.

The other day my dad and I were hauling some large pieces of particle board in his pickup. My dad took a turn too fast and suddenly all of the particle board fell out of the pickup and onto the busy four-lane road. All of the cars around us came to a stop – then some started to zigzag – as we jumped out of the pickup to pick up those pieces of particle board. But you know what? No one came to help us. No one except this older white man begging for money on the side of the road.

How many “others” was he from us? Well, I didn't have a chance to ask him if he's college educated, but from his appearance and the sign he is carrying he is living a different life from me, an “other” life – he is homeless, he is poor, he appears to have no job, no family, no health insurance, no savings account, no pension. And yet, as a fellow human being, he saw a need and he was there. He jumped over all those “others” that separated us and immediately helped us.

Does this crack open my worldview a little? Well, I would like to say that I already viewed him as a fellow human being. I mean, I did, I do. But would I have immediately jumped around several lanes of traffic to help him? I don't know. Or would I have thought, “Oh, someone will help him. He's too far away from me and look at all those cars.”

The woman today confronts Jesus and she confronts us. She is the one that is maligned and ignored. She is the one who those in power disregard. She is the one who cracks open our worldview from whatever privilege we might have, from whatever prejudice we carry around. It's disconcerting. It's uncomfortable.

And yet ... what hope we see in today's scripture. Jesus – Jesus himself - was forced to look at himself and make a change. He was part of his culture and his time, and in this encounter he suddenly had a new self-understanding, and a new understanding of his ministry. Open, inclusive, loving ministry no matter what. And this is what we are called to be, as people who claim Jesus as leader, teacher, Savior, Lord. Open, inclusive, loving, and not afraid to confront hatred and prejudice, wherever it may be – inside of us and outside of us – with love and with courage and with hope.

For truly the realm, the Kingdom of God is stronger than the forces of evil around us. As Martin Luther King said after the Selma march, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” However long it takes, God's Kingdom will come and God's will will be done on earth even as it is in heaven. Confess, repent, stand up, speak, move, act, trust, hope, believe.

This is our calling as followers of Jesus. Holding fast the Canaanite woman and also these words from Paul, *“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.”* Galatians 3:28 Amen