

MATTHEW 15  
CANAANITE WOMAN  
AUGUST 16 2020

Interesting text eh?  
How did you respond?

Erin and I talked about it, as we prepared to read it for you  
and realized how much depends on how it's read  
and how it's read depends on the mind and soul set we bring to it in the first place.

Do you know what I mean?

This is so disturbing – Jesus first ignoring this woman  
*the first and only time in the gospels that he ignores a cry for help*

and then when he does speak  
it's –  
first to tell her she's not among those he's come to save  
and then  
calling her a dog.

This is profoundly disturbing.

And among the myriad questions it poses is:

WHY DID MATTHEW AND MARK BEFORE HIM EVEN INCLUDE THIS IN THIS GOSPEL? Of  
all the stories he must have had available to him about Jesus, why this one?  
What did he hope we would take away from this story?

He's written his gospel not as some objective history or biography of Jesus  
but as a GOSPEL – this author wants to convince you of something; wants you to know that Jesus  
changed his life, is the very presence of God among us, and is worthy of your loyalty, your love, the  
energy of your life.

AND Matthew in particular has made it clear all through his gospel that the love and grace of God in  
Jesus are not confined to any particular race of people. He starts out his gospel with Jesus' genealogy in  
which there are 3 Gentile women with dodgy pasts.....and then he tells the story of the visit of the magi  
– foreigners, whose language, religion, culture were different, and who form part of the iconic image of  
who Jesus is. they're always in the nativity scene, right? Every Christmas card. There they are.  
Foreigners! . Matthew is very aware of issues of race and exclusion.

How does this story contribute to his goal??

Who is Jesus shown to BE here? He comes across as....well.....not the Jesus we've come to expect.

So.. for example....if you were reading this out loud for us  
and you got to the line

where he says

*"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"*

How would you read that? What tone? He's not saying it to HER at this point, ....he's responding to the disciples' request that he send her away. Is he saying it almost to himself? As though he's questioning it? *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel...wasn't I?"* Like that?

or.... Is it defensive? *"I've got all I can handle here with the people of Israel"* What's his tone?

These stories were originally **told**, not read  
and the voice of the teller can raise so many different possibilities.

Same as the line he says to her:

*"It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs"*

how would you read that?

What is his tone?

Is he, as some commentators say, and as I myself have preached in the past....is he saying it – in a way that invites her rebuttal, rabbi to rabbi style....

inviting her rebuttal, as if to say

*"Some people here would say that it's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs – what do you and I have to say to that?"*

That's what I *want* to do, because I don't want Jesus to have meant that. I want to protect him, I want an explanation I can live with. You know?

But I'm not sure that's fair to the text, or to you, or to Jesus, for that matter. To what the Spirit has to say to us right now. So.....let's go a little deeper and see what we can find.

This week I've been a little – ok more than a little – consumed with this reading. It's on my mind a lot. And I talked with some young women about it. They are part of this congregation, different from me in age, and some in ethnicity, and I just threw it out there for their reaction.

Here's what one of them wrote to me:

*I like the woman, who continues to speak up despite being silenced and compared to a dog. But I'd consider even focusing on the disciples. Jesus has a racist knee-jerk reaction - basically going "not my problem" and disengaging himself from the conversation. But it IS his problem.*

*Although the disciples say "send her away", this could be interpreted to mean, "This is making us uncomfortable, make it stop". They recognize the woman's obvious pain, but they don't know what to do. Especially when their leader and guide (Jesus) so openly disregards her.*

*I'd consider this a parallel to having an uncomfortable conversation with a loved one about human rights. When someone you love says "Black lives?? Well, ALL lives matter", or another shortsighted or harmful idea, what do you do? It's a tough position to be in.*

*You could relate this text to the importance of calling out racism in one's family and friends. To continue to use our voices and demand what is right. AND relating to this idea: in an issue of human rights, nothing is ever "not your problem". Racism is a white-people problem, and we need to speak up and address it (even when it comes from someone we love).*

*I'm definitely wrestling with my own thoughts on this, but I'm trying to frame it from the disciples' point of view, and how they might have felt seeing their leader being so openly racist and struggling to call him out on it.*

*I remember a quote from the Harry Potter books, which has stuck with me since I was young. It goes:*

*"It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends."*

Another said

*To me, Jesus' answer changes the meaning of the passage. He refers to her as a dog, then directly calls her a woman. Jesus doesn't specify her as a Canaanite; she and her daughter are simply people. He then proceeds to give her, not crumbs of God's love, but the 'children's food' divine nourishment of instantly healing her daughter.*

*Hence, no matter how badly of a name someone calls you or tries to belittle you (and I'm still unsettled by the idea of Jesus being the perpetrator), you're always worthy of God's love. Ultimately, I see Jesus rewarding a woman for having faith, not only in God but also in herself and her daughter.*

The other young woman said

*"It makes me so happy to hear this"  
and when I asked why  
she said*

*that is shows Jesus' humanity; that he was a man of his culture and got caught up in the cultural assumptions that were common then, that he probably never realized were there inside him....(that the Canaanites were "the other" - )  
and most of all it makes her happy to hear that he's human, and that he listened, and that he's willing to be confronted, and to change.*

(note to self; always check with young people before writing my sermon!!)

So: what about you?

I find this reading compelling and powerful and honestly it seems to me to be a pitch perfect picture of the United Church right now. We've had a couple of those lately.

It's about racism. And our response to it.

Because the truth is that we (that is the church) are overwhelmingly white in the midst of communities with black and brown faces all around us.

The colour palate of our congregations does not match the colour palate of the society in which we live.

Why is this  
and what are we doing about it?

We say all the time “Everyone is welcome here” and we mean that. We do. Don’t we  
So...why? Why are we such a white church?

At the last national meeting of the UCC, it was called General Council  
the commissioners met for several days, reps from every part of Canada.... did the work they were  
called to do,  
and it was almost over  
and people were tired and thinking about going home  
and the moderator said  
Any new business? (which at every meeting I’ve ever attended, is shorthand for “let’s go”)

And my friend and colleague Paul Walfall got up to the mic  
and said something like

What are we going to do about racism in the church? And he talked then, at some length, about racism  
in the church we love and his experience of it as a black man.

And there is an ongoing response resulting from his brave action  
but what is interesting to me  
is my own initial reaction to that  
which seemed to mirror the reaction of the commissioners gathered there

We’re not racist. We’re not. We follow Jesus who welcomed everyone and so do we and what do you  
mean?

We’re used to being on Jesus’ side – you know? Our definition of ourselves, our self understanding is  
that we’re the good guys!  
We’re used to being on the side of justice – and taking flack for it... - we’re the ones who went to the  
wall over and over again through our history -  
in the 40s when Jehovah Witnesses were being discriminated against in Quebec – who was the only  
church that defended their rights? US. That’s who. Who almost imploded as a church standing for  
LGBTQ2 folk in the 80s? Us that’s who. Which church was the first ever to ordain women, to make an  
apology with funding to back it up to First Nations...

and on and on.  
That’s what we say to ourselves.

And those things are all true.

But that does not mean we have not been racist, are not racist now  
And it’s not only uncomfortable to have to hear this,  
but it feels like an assault on who we have claimed to be.  
It’s hard.

Not, however, as hard as it is to be a person of colour and to experience these things from the very  
church that turns away, is silent in the face of cries for help, and then denies their experience.

And the thing is....some of it has nothing to do with our intentions. We don't set out to be racist, but we live and act out of what we learn from having grown up in this society. We don't INTEND the exclusion, but it's not about our intent. And we need to shake that off so we can listen. Really listen. I'll tell you a story from our congregation that is a small but for me important example:

At Easter time this year, we couldn't have a worship service, and I wanted some ...public statement somehow that celebrated the wonder of Easter. And so we made (well, Tess made and Joy and John put up) a big sheet that had painted on it the words LOVE LIVES.  
And we took it down after the week of Easter, and then put it up again at Pentecost.

By that time, the Black Lives Matter movement was at its peak.....  
and so was the reactionary response "ALL lives matter" ( a perfect example of the privilege of not having to listen or understand)  
and someone said to me - I heard that you have a sign outside your church that says All Lives Matter and I said  
we do NOT  
and then it hit me  
love lives  
now looks exactly like  
love lives  
and means exactly the opposite.  
And it didn't matter at that point what we MEANT  
it mattered how it was received  
and that was not ours to judge  
and we needed to listen  
and take it down.

We need to listen. It is not ours, (by ours I mean white people) It is not ours to say what someone else's experience is  
correct it for them  
and keep on doing what we've always done  
no matter what our intent.

Jesus has just finished a confrontation with the Pharisees where he says it's not religious practices but rather what you say and how you live that matters...

and like this scene where the Canaanite woman (the Canaanites were the people of that land who had been displaced from their land and slaughtered by the "people of God" in the name of God centuries before.....you can't make this stuff up – it preaches itself!)

like this scene where a Canaanite woman calls Jesus out – throwing his own words back at him....  
she won't be quiet -  
the Bible doesn't give her a name but tradition does. Tradition calls her Justa. I asked Ashley, a 10 year old girl who is part of our story time community. Ashley names our unnamed Bible characters. Ashley says that this woman is called Ruth and her daughter is Zoe.  
Ruth just....  
won't be quiet.

the disciples are uncomfortable, then angry, want her to stop and nevertheless she persists... she won't let go until she receives a blessing.

stages a demonstration, a public confrontation

and for the first and only time in the gospels in a sparring match of words and ideas Jesus loses.

He listens

and he loses.

And he admits it and he changes his mind. I picture him laughing as he says to her that last line

Many people have trouble with this reading because it shows Jesus in a bad light.

And our more fundamentalist sisters and brothers would say that Jesus is God and couldn't possibly have been racist it must mean something else.

May I just suggest this as a final thought:

THIS WILLINGNESS OF JESUS TO LISTEN, TO CHANGE HIS MIND, TO BE MOVED BY ANOTHER'S PAIN, TO LISTEN AND UNDERSTAND AND CHANGE IN THIS JESUS' HEART IS AS CLOSE TO THE HEART OF GOD AS IT'S EVER BEEN

Sister Corita once said that the most theological of all words is "WOW!" I have no idea what Jesus said to her afterwards. I hope that after she had run home to her daughter, I hope they both came back, they talked and laughed, but I believe among other things he said "Wow – you were right – thank you for persisting". If he can say that in response to the insight of a poor, desperate, marginalized foreign woman, than the heart of Jesus is very close to the heart of God. Open. Changing. Profoundly responsive to need. Delighting in those who will challenge for justice.

I love this reading in the end, as uncomfortable as it makes me. And I love this woman....how she turns my ideas inside out.

That is the very sign, the very essence of God. This to me is what Jesus is about even if he didn't know it himself as he evolved into who God needed him to be.

Where is God in this passage? In Jesus' final response and.....

And finally - the voice of God sounds like HER voice – like the mother whose child is suffering.

Mothers are like that. Do not mess with a mother whose child is in danger.

Mothers are like that and so is God.

persistent, abrasive, unrelenting, loud and demanding when the lives of her precious children are in danger

