“What Would Jesus Learn?”

The Rev. Katie Day

Matthew 15: 21-28

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This week’s text is unsettling, upsetting.

We find Jesus out of town, as it were, in a foreign land. He is seemingly not in town for a public appearance – this is a non-Jewish region, and the Jewish people, Jesus and the disciples included, would have considered the land and its inhabitants “unclean.” But, as so often is the case with celebrity, word gets around, and almost immediately upon his arrival, someone greets him.

It’s a woman (which isn’t good) and she’s alone (which isn’t good) and she’s not Jewish (which isn’t good). In fact, the author of Matthew’s gospel describes her as a “Canaanite.” The Canaanites, historically, were the original inhabitants of the land God promised to Abraham, the “promised land,” where the people of Israel conquered, destroyed, and assimilated their enemies, the race of Canaanites, in order to “inherit” the land.

There hadn’t been Canaanites for centuries – for this woman to be identified as one is to imply that she is the ultimate outsider, unclean, an enemy of the people of God. Of course, as professor Mitzi J. Smith over at Columbia Seminary points out, three of the five women in Jesus’ genealogy, as recorded in Matthew, Chapter 1, were Canaanites: Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. This woman’s ancestors were Jesus’ foremothers. Outsiders, enemies, but grafted onto Jesus’ family tree. (Smith)

The Canaanite woman begs Jesus to cure her daughter. She knows who he is,

his power. She calls him “Lord,” and “Son of David.” She takes a knee. She begs him to help her child. And Jesus says “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Yes, this is his mission; even at his birth: “he will save his people from their sins (1:21),” “the child who has been born king of the Jews (2:2),” “a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel (2:6).” This was never up for debate.

But then, Jesus says this: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Which isn’t right, and isn’t fair, and isn’t at all like Jesus is supposed to act. Right? What would Jesus do? Or how would he do it? That’s what we’re meant to ask ourselves?

Jesus would look at a woman on her knees begging for her daughter’s life, and basically says “no,” and adds insult to injury by calling her and her daughter “dogs.”

Now, there are those who try to soften this blow: Some say that the word in Greek actually means “puppies,” like a house pet, so it’s sweet and endearing.

Nope. Still insulting. Some say that Jesus was really tired and wanted to hide away from the crowds who have been following him, so maybe he’s just having an off day. Nope. I don’t see Jesus being mean because he’s sleepy. Some say he’s testing her faith, and he was always going to heal her daughter. No. This is almost the worst excuse of all. Jesus isn’t cruel to those desperately in need who seek him out, just to teach them a lesson, or prove some point. No. I believe Jesus was not going to heal her daughter.

I believe Jesus fully understood his mission to be to the Jewish people, I believe he was acting the way he felt sure that he should. (*Could* Jesus act any other way?)

And then comes the surprise. The woman is quick, and her retort clever: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” And that’s when it happens. Jesus has to practice what he preaches.

You see, “context” is my magic word, right? Context matters, and right before this story is another story of great importance to this moment: Some Pharisees and scribes made a complaint to Jesus about his disciples not washing their hands, and, while we in COVID times can fully understand their concern, it was meant to be a trap to catch Jesus breaking the Law. Jesus’ response was quick and his retort clever: that it is what is *inside* of us that defiles, not outside. Hatred in our hearts makes us unclean, not dirt on our hands. Jesus reframed the Law in a few short sentences.

So, context. Immediately before our story, Jesus had preached to the Pharisees about letting go of traditions we hold dear in order to allow God to teach us something new, to give us new traditions. It’s one thing for Jesus to preach that sermon, and another thing for him to live it.

Now, in our story this morning, it is Jesus, in the place of the Pharisees, who was holding tight to tradition: he was sent to Israel, the chosen people of God.

But (lucky for all of us non-Israelites here this morning), the Canaanite woman came along and helps Jesus unclench his tight fists, and showed him that there is room for a few more folks in God’s plan.

Jesus immediately responds to her: “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

This can be uncomfortable: God changing God’s mind like that. One of the ways we like to think about God is “unchanging,” and yet here God goes, changing. God changes not because God is weak or subject to peer pressure,

but because God is in active relationship with humanity.

We respond to what God is doing in our lives, in the world, and God responds to us by continually doing new things – it’s why we pray, isn’t it? Or ask others to pray for us? Because we believe, deep in our souls, that God responds to us.

And so Jesus responds to the woman who has come so faithfully, the woman who, by all accounting, was not *supposed* to receive *anything* from him, the woman who, by virtue of her gender, her status, her racial-ethnic identity, was excluded from the covenant community, and who now risked exclusion from her own community for this.

God’s promises held nothing for her, until Jesus grants her request. When he acquiesces and heals her daughter, Jesus begins to live out his sermon for all of us: that God’s relationship with humanity isn’t about who’s in or who’s out, but it’s love that is bigger and broader and more open – more changeable – than even Jesus imagined.

God had imagined it – we heard Carol Ann read words from the prophet Isaiah, speaking God’s words to the people following their exile: “Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered” (Isaiah 56:8).

If God could imagine it, why did Jesus seem to struggle with it? We understand Jesus to be *both* fully human *and* fully God, and for centuries, followers of Christ have argued about this and struggled to understand how that really works.

Perhaps this story helps us see that in order for Jesus to be both fully God and fully human, he had to be open to being both at the same time.

When Jesus responded to the Canaanite woman, he opened himself up to something new: a new tradition of inclusion into God’s covenant community,

a tradition of reaching out not only to the Jewish people but to Gentiles, non-Jews, a tradition that is directly responsible for all of us worshiping together this morning.

This story of inclusion, of drawing the circle wider, combined with Jesus’ other messages and examples of teaching and healing, broadcasts God’s message loud and clear that all of God’s children are to be valued and embraced.

What we can learn from watching and listening to Jesus in the gospels is that there are no external barriers between God and humanity. Race, gender, orientation, age, ability, class: none of these exclude anyone from God’s love.

Therefore, it follows that there should be no external barriers between humans, especially not in the Church. Everyone’s in, family. Everyone’s in.

Dorotheos of Gaza was a monk who lived in the 6th century. In one of his homilies, Dorotheos invited his hearers to imagine a circle, with God as the center point. Straight lines lead from the perimeter of the circle to the center.

“The straight lines drawn from the circumference to the center are the lives of human beings,” Dorotheos said. “…To move toward God, then, human beings move from the circumference along the various radii of the circle to the center. But at the same time, the closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God.”(Bondi)

A close up of a sign

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Artist Jan Richardson writes, “Jesus has a notion of [family] that goes

deeper and broader than ours often does. Jesus traces his circle wide, calling us all to be kinfolk to him by doing what God desires us to do. And if kinfolk to him, then kinfolk to one another, with all the delights and aches that come in learning to be a family.” (Richardson)

It took immense courage for the Canaanite woman to seek out Jesus and beg for healing for her daughter. And, I believe it took courage for Jesus to learn from her, and to act accordingly and do the right thing, and heal her child.

Can you imagine if he hadn’t?

What would Jesus do?

What would Jesus learn?

What does it look like for us to learn like Jesus – to truly *see* the people we would rather send away, the ones who keep shouting, the ones who kneel down, who beg for mercy, for help, for our attention, for justice – and to learn from them that perhaps the circle is wider than we originally imagined.

It is.

The circle is always wider.

# Works Cited

Bondi, Roberta. *To Love As God Loves*. n.d.

Richardson, Jan. *The Painted Prayerbook*. 5 June 2012. 12 August 2020.

Smith, Mitzi J. *Working Preacher*. 2020. 12 August 2020.