

The 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
August 16, 2020  
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8  
Psalm 67  
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32  
Matthew 15:10-28

*Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.*

Let me begin my sermon this morning by recalling the opening words of the prayer assigned to us for today:

Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life ...

And I went on to pray for the “grace” to “follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life.”

Now I wouldn't normally balk at such a prayer. The life of Jesus is, as that collects puts it, “an example of godly life.” And we all stumble in responding to the call “to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life.”

I wouldn't normally balk at such a prayer. But I hesitate this morning.

Because the Jesus we see in this morning's gospel, at least at the start of his encounter with an unnamed Canaanite woman, seems to be following the lead of his disciples (and the teachings of religious, sexist bigots) rather than following the heart of his God. And Jesus' life, in that moment at least, strikes me as anything but exemplary for the rest of us.

A woman desperately cries out to Jesus, longing for her daughter to be safe, for her family to be made whole again. And Jesus ignores her. And when Jesus first responds, he responds not to her but rather to his disciples when they complain about her, saying (in essence) that his interest is with his own people; he has no interest in “her kind.” And when he finally does respond directly to this woman, and only after she's fallen down at his feet, Jesus seems to call her people dogs.

No, that seems anything but exemplary. I do not perceive a holy call to follow in those steps.

I'm not alone. Biblical scholars and preachers work hard to protect Jesus' reputation. One interpretive trick is to suggest that Jesus doesn't really mean any of the vile things he says. He merely pretends to agree with the disciples. Or he says out loud what they're thinking.

And he does it all to show them – and us – how someone's inner attitudes get expressed in harmful words and reprehensible deeds.

Another approach is to suggest that maybe Jesus was just having a bad day. And actually that's not a terrible point. The traditional affirmation of the Creeds, after all, is that Jesus is fully divine AND fully human. And it's all-too-human for any of us to have a bad day.

Maybe the stress of all that had so recently happened – the beheading of John the Baptist, the demands of a hungry multitude, the fears of his storm-tossed disciples, and the incessant criticism of the Pharisees got to Jesus – and he just snapped. As one commentator rhetorically asks, "If he was infallible, was he necessarily unflappable?"

So maybe we should cut Jesus some slack.

Or maybe we shouldn't. After all, Matthew doesn't offer any hint that Jesus is using this as a teaching moment or that Jesus was having an especially bad day. No, if we take this account all at face-value, it seems pretty straightforward: disturbing, but straightforward.

Rather than soften this disturbing narrative, maybe there is no hidden meaning behind Jesus' words, no symbolic understanding, no false report of the encounter. Maybe we should let Matthew tell us something that he found hard to say and we find hard to hear. Because maybe this story tells us about a very human moment and a godly response.

For if Jesus was truly and fully human, he would have been subject to inherited prejudices. And that wouldn't have been his fault. He would have been raised that way, steeped in ethnic biases and sexist attitudes and subject to all manner of cultural blinders. He would have been enculturated with attitudes that looked down on certain groups of people.

But take note of this: if Matthew lets us see Jesus this way, Matthew also compels us to see something more.

We were all raised with sexist attitudes and racist biases. And most of us, most of the time, are blind to our inherited likes and dislikes, so they too-easily rule our responses. It's hard for us to step aside from those things and see some new possibility.

But Jesus does that which is hard for us. Even if we allow that Jesus was slow to respond that day, Jesus does finally let this woman – this foreign, irreligious, inappropriate nuisance – have her say.

And when all is said and done, Jesus commends her for her "great faith."

If Peter showed a "little faith" when he stepped out of a boat and started to walk on water, then Jesus speaking of this woman's "great faith" is high praise indeed. Peter saw the waves and became frightened. This woman experiences wave after wave of rejection and ridicule, and yet she keeps on demanding to be heard.

It's pretty amazing. Even today – and many of you do not need ME to tell you this – women have to be careful about how they express themselves. Men are praised for being assertive, authoritative, dedicated, decisive. Women, as so many of you know, may behave exactly the same as their male colleagues and be criticized for being forward, abrasive, aggressive, difficult.

But for all the reasons why this Canaanite woman should have behaved more demurely, more appropriately to her sex and status, she doesn't. She persists. Like Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, Shirley Chisolm and so many others in our own nation's history, she persists.

One wonders how many other anonymous women, like the Canaanite woman in this morning's gospel, have persisted as a lone minority voice among a majority of authoritative and powerful men. That's what makes her praiseworthy indeed.

She does not break down in tears. Nor does she crawl off to the side of the road or run home to watch her daughter die. She persists, for she is convinced that her daughter deserves to be given a chance at living a normal, productive life.

And when Jesus insults her, she does not jump up retaliate. Jesus hurls a harsh insult at her – practically an ethnic slur – and she calmly replies; she does not shout back in kind, saying, "I am not a dog, you swine" (which would be an apt slur against any observant Jew). No, she accepts the slur and uses it to challenge Jesus: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

She concedes the point. "Yes, Lord, I am not a Jew." She concedes that point, but then insists that it's not the point that matters. "I am not a Jew, yet the God you have been talking about has enough blessing for everyone."

And perhaps her words remind Jesus of that time when, after he and the disciples had fed thousands (that day not so long before), there were twelve baskets left over. Or perhaps her words merely remind Jesus of what he himself had just been saying about what defiles a person and what doesn't.

Or perhaps her words remind Jesus of what the prophet Isaiah said in that first reading we heard here this morning. Go back again and look at that reading, with the so-familiar line about God's house being a place for everyone. And notice that foreigners are explicitly included in the word of welcome.

And while you're at it, you might also go back and look at the verses we *didn't* read here this morning. The framers of our lectionary left out verses about eunuchs being welcomed – and respected – among God's people. I suspect that when they decided what we would hear in church (and what we wouldn't), they decided we wouldn't want any reference to genitalia in church, that we couldn't handle the challenge of God's radical welcome of all sorts of people, including the sort of people that polite society has historically shunned. But I digress. (Sort of.)

Whether the woman's words remind Jesus of any of this or not, she wins him over.

I've been giving it some thought and, so far as I can remember, this is the only occasion anywhere in the gospels when we hear that Jesus loses an argument – and to a woman, a foreigner, someone who worships the wrong god in the wrong way in the wrong place.

Jesus lets her be the teacher. He's content to be her disciple. He listens to her. He hears her.

And in the process, it sure looks like Jesus learns that God's Kingdom – and his own call to call it into being – is bigger than he had yet understood, that the love of God is more encompassing than he'd first imagined. And when Jesus praises her "great faith," it's almost a parable that announces: "the kingdom of heaven is like a foreign woman teaching the Son of God about mercy." (Look for love in all the wrong places!)

And it's here, in this moment, that I see something in Jesus that truly is exemplary, and blessed steps that are worth our following.

For you see, we have all been born into a broken world full of racist preconceptions and sexist biases and cultural blinders. They've soaked into us. That's not our fault. We're human, and this is how we've all learned to fit into the world as it is.

But Jesus shows us, right there at that transformative moment at the end, that we don't have to remain content with the world as it is.

For you see, Jesus was changed in his encounter with this anonymous, annoying, persistent woman of great faith. He chose to listen to someone others would have ignored, and he chose to act in compassion in a situation when no one would have faulted him for moving on. In choosing to listen, to change his mind (against the tide of conventional thinking), and then to heal, Jesus gives us "an example of godly life" and shows "blessed steps" – steps we can follow in order to learn what it is to be truly and fully human. For that is our calling: to be truly and fully human.

This past Wednesday, officers from ICE detained two Latino men. They were neighbors of ours. They have families who live in our communities. The call went out on social media for members of the community to come out in solidarity with them.

I did not join that movement that day. I was too slow. I was too late. But I've heard some of the stories from those who did go.

As many as 2,000 people showed up. They were not anti-government or anti-ICE; they were pro-family: supportive of the families whose lives were being torn apart; and supportive of the human family here in Bend.

From the mouths of those who were there – and an audio clip I heard on the news – I heard a child who cried out, his head pressed against the side of a bus, longing for his papa to be safe, for his family to be made whole again. And those who went out to resist this past Wednesday persisted, believing that these children of God deserve to be given a chance at living a normal, productive life. Nothing more. Nothing less.

When next the call goes out, I pray that I hear it in time – and that I heed it.

Today's gospel is so timely.

For if we see that even Jesus (on this one occasion told to us in this morning' gospel) ... if we see that even Jesus, a fully human Jesus, was once slow to respond, maybe I can cut myself a little slack for not always being quick to respond in my own time.

Oh, but I can only cut myself a little slack if I take seriously to heart the rest of this gospel story that tells me of Jesus' willingness to be bothered by the woman's cries, disturbed enough to see her and to care, willing enough to stop and to listen to her, and finally able to enlarge his vision of God's call on him and all of us who are called to follow in his most blessed footsteps.