

Voices Long Silenced

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Isaiah 56:1, 6-8, Matthew 15:21-28

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This week has been uncomfortable—sitting with the story of the Canaanite Woman. This is an uncomfortable story, for many of us. In it, Jesus isn't acting like Jesus, at least not like the Jesus that we have come to depend on: the Jesus who is merciful and kind, who is friend and savior, whose care is inclusive.

His actions and words seem decidedly un-Christ-like.

To be fair, this unnamed Canaanite Woman was literally the one that “Momma warned him about.” But still!

To Matthew's Jewish audience she would have been a reviled figure, buried under generations of deep prejudice. From the days of Noah, Canaanites were considered cursed. They worshipped foreign gods and idols. They were the original occupants of the Promised Land. In later days, Canaanite kings led armies that ruled Israel as a conquered people. Perhaps most importantly—throughout the foundational history—Canaanites threatened to destroy Israelite identity through cultural assimilation and intermarriage.

It wouldn't be too far a stretch to say that for the Jews of the day, this woman would have represented the most despised of Gentile “otherness.” So this encounter between Jewish Messiah and the supplicant Canaanite gains greater significance in Matthew's narrative, naming the tension that weaves throughout his gospel.

Jesus has come with a messianic mission to the “lost sheep” of Israel; yet he also comes as one ordained to redeem the world.

Despite acting to heal a Roman Centurion's servant in Matthew 8, Jesus is explicit in his instructions to the disciples in Matthew 10—as they go out in mission they must minister exclusively to the “house of Israel” while avoiding travel among the Gentiles and Samaritan towns.

Then in today's gospel, we read about Jesus in full retreat from those “lost sheep” seeking refuge on the Canaanite seashore near Tyre and Sidon. And if we read Matthew's narrative, it is NO wonder, because the previous days and weeks have been grueling and perhaps even discouraging to Jesus.

As we tune it, the people of his hometown have rejected his ministry. His proclaimer, John the Baptist, has been executed. While seeking solitude, Jesus was met with a large crowd which needed healing and feeding; some five thousand men and countless women and children. While seeking time to pray, he has to rescue Peter from his faithful yet flawed attempt to walk on water. Landing at Gennesaret, there were more crowds and more healing and yet another confrontation with the religious authorities, whom Jesus noted were more concerned with their tradition than obedience to God's commandments. Yet, perhaps the final strain comes as he finds himself explain his actions and words to the disciples, whose biggest worry was that Jesus had somehow offended the Pharisees.

In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, “Everywhere Jesus turns he finds need—need and people who want what he can do for them but who remain blind to who he is.”¹

Tyre and Sidon must have seemed blessedly free of the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” until the vacation idyll was broken by the shouts of the Canaanite woman.

In Matthew’s narrative, she shouts, Jesus is silent, the disciples are—well—embarrassed by the scene created by this woman who behaves so immodestly in such a very public setting.

If the lines seem quickly drawn between the woman as petitioner and Jesus as judge, this is no accident. Matthew molds the narrative from Mark’s gospel into direct conversation to remind his Jewish-Christian audience of ancient stories where faithful people pleaded with God in order to change God’s mind.

This judgment narrative is reinforced by the disciples’ request that Jesus dismiss the woman, a phrase that might also read “liberate her” and implies that Jesus should adjudicate her case and give her some sort of answer. (Read, “Tell her NO!”)

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David...”

This outsider, this Canaanite, this woman, makes her appeal in language that demonstrates her knowledge of Jesus’ messianic identity and her trust in the overflowing mercy of God. She uses the words of the *Kyrie Eleison* that we have sung today—Lord, have mercy.

She demonstrates her faith that God’s love extends beyond the people of the covenant—even to foreigners whom God would gather up alongside the “outcasts of Israel” and bring into the house of God.

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David...”

Perhaps it was ironic to Jesus that this recognition of Jesus’ messianic status came not from his home town, not from the authorities of his own religion, not even from his own disciples, but from a culturally despised, ritually unclean, foreign woman. AND, she will not be silenced by Jesus’ remark that he was sent “only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Instead she then kneels, in a posture of humility and worship, before Jesus and repeats her plea.

I am reminded of Shirley MacLaine in *Terms of Endearment*—shouting at nurses, demanding the pain medication needed to relieve her dying daughter’s suffering.

I am reminded of Meryl Streep in *Out of Africa*—as her character kneels before the governor to plead for her Kikuyu friends that they not be displaced from the land.

I think about the mothers in this country who are met with racial prejudice, who seek justice for their children in our “land of opportunity.”

This week, in a Canaanite woman's shouts, I hear the voice of a mother mourning the shooting death of her unarmed black son. I hear the desperation of tens of thousands of Central American parents whose children are making the dangerous trip to America alone. I hear the cries of mercy from Central African nations bowed under the weight of poverty and epidemic.

So I am startled when I hear the Canaanite woman's persistent cries met with an insult from Jesus' mouth. But Jesus weighs out his answer as he has in this entire exchange and then gets down-right nasty.

"It isn't fair to take the children' food and throw it to the dogs."

If I had any doubts that Jesus intended to silence this woman they are gone when he compares her to a dog—even if the dog is a little dog, even if the dog is a household pet. And I am reminded of the violence that often goes hand-in-hand with dehumanizing name calling, a scene that has played out just this week in Ferguson, Missouri.

I find myself leaning into the tension in Matthew's gospel, hearing the Jesus whose last nerve seems frayed, who now defends the limits of his ministry. And it is in precisely this moment that God ministers to Jesus through the faith of a Canaanite woman.

"Yes, Lord," she says, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Jae Won Lee, a professor at McCormick Seminary, puts it this way:

"...she violates boundaries... of ethnicity, heritage, religion, gender, and demon possession. She must even contend with Jesus' reluctance to violate the ethnic boundary; but contend she does. In the grand scheme of Matthew, she believes that she and her daughter are people who should benefit from... God's kingdom. So she is willing to break through the barriers, and breaking through the barriers dramatizes her faith."²

Jesus responds to her faith with an expansive change of heart, recognizing her faith and healing her daughter. In doing so, Jesus demonstrates the expansive breadth of God's redemption which is just as wide as Isaiah predicts it to be. The "house of prayer for all peoples" is born again within this "gospel for all nations."³

Jesus comes away from the encounter restored and returns to Galilee to continue his ministry. And Matthew's gospel reaches its zenith, marking the deep shift in narrative that will conclude with the Great Commission—in which the resurrected Christ instructs the disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations..."

During this week, I wondered what the story had to say to us—in this time, in this place.

I was interested to find that the entire narrative, Matthew 15:21-28 is listed as a cross reference for line 70 of the Brief Statement of Faith that we will read this morning.

[line 65] In a broken and fearful world,

[line 66] the Spirit gives us courage...

[line 70] to hear the voices of people long silenced...

It seems that it takes courage—even for Jesus—to hear the voices of the marginalized. He must overcome cultural prejudice and missional limits in order to hear and then answer the Canaanite woman’s plea.

It takes courage to leave the confines of comfortable relationships and comfortable surroundings. It takes courage to meet people on their home ground and issue the invitation of the gospel into God’s healing love. It takes courage to listen to another’s cry for mercy, to bear witness to injustice or oppression or grief or loss, to work with others for justice, freedom and peace.

It takes courage, but as we seek follow Christ, it becomes our calling.

The tension in Matthew’s gospel might well be the tension in our world, between those who claim the love of God and those who still wait for word of it. AND we are called to bear witness in that tension.

So, our youth work at Cracker Box Palace and while they restore classrooms, clean stalls, and paint trailers, they become witnesses to the need for shelter and sanctuary that is shared by people and animals alike.

Our Katrina teams work in New Orleans and while they restore homes, they become witnesses to loss and to hope.

Our Tutors work with children in city schools and become witnesses to the deprivations of poverty and entrenched racial and economic injustice.

Friends, we are called to leave the sanctuary of this place, and go out into the world. Once there, we are called to bear witness to the world’s brokenness while proclaiming the good news of God’s mercy and love. And we know that this calling is not without its consolation; just ask our youth, our Katrina teams, our Tutors.

Our own restoration and wholeness increase as others share in the consolation and mercy of God. And with each shared mercy, with each act of compassion, with each word of witness, we become more complete. For we, like the Canaanite woman and her daughter, become God’s own children, invited to participate in the expansive love and mercy of God extended in Jesus Christ for the sake of the world.

Amen.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor. *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*. WJK: Louisville, 2004. p 62.

² Jae Won Lee. “Exegetical Perspective on Matthew 15:(10-20) 21-28.” *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 3*. WJK: Louisville, 2011. p 316.

³ *Ibid.* p 361.