

August 16, 2020

**“Nevertheless, She Persisted”
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake**

Scripture Readings:

Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28

(Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.")

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly

Thank you. One of the most argued Christological questions is whether or not Jesus is Human or Divine or Both. These discussions have gone on for 2 millennia and will probably never be resolved. But in the passage that Joan read we see Jesus as very human. We see him at the limits of what his incarnation can take. In the first half of this scripture Jesus, who is once again telling us that it's not the RULES that matter, but that it is how we treat one another that matters, what comes out of our mouth matters! Evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander, basically the ten commandments, these are what matter. Now he goes on to say that these are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

Theologically I appreciate this break from the levitical code but please right now, wash your hands before eating! Jesus is a boundary breaker, over and over again he makes this point. **That Love is more important than Religious laws and codes.** But we start seeing his humanness show when the disciples ask him to explain again what he just said. Now, we have inherited a very sterile version of this interaction through the limits of language and translation, but don't hear this as "My poor disciple you still don't understand?" But hear it this way, "big eye roll, Argh! YOU STILL DON'T GET IT?"

In his quick temper, he recognizes that he needs a break, to get away from the needy and the ignorant. He yearns for some down time to refuel with the spirit, so he heads to the beach away from it all in the country. But because he is now well known throughout the land, everywhere he goes he is recognized. What popped into my head was an image of Jesus as a celebrity, in a ball cap and sunglasses trying to be anonymous but to no avail, the paparazzi still finds him. He recognized his need for a break and is very frustrated he can't get one. So this Jesus, in need of a break, is the one who encounters this noisy, yelling, Canaanite woman insisting that Jesus heal her daughter. The fact that she was Canaanite means she is a foreign, gentile, woman who doesn't know her place. Jewish culture in the first century was very patriarchal. The daily prayers of Jewish men included this prayer of thanksgiving: "Praise be to God that I was not created a woman." The fact that she was foreign, woman, gentile, these were all reasons for this woman to not dare address this Rabbi, healer, and holy man. But she persisted, because she was relying on one of the greatest sources of courage found on this earth, the power and desperation of a Mother's love. The disciples in their usual ignorance, just want her to go away, she is noisy, unworthy, bothersome.

And Jesus, our exhausted, drained and depleted Lord does something so very uncharacteristic of him. He calls her a dog. He calls her a dog because she is a Canaanite so make no mistake Jesus uses a racial slur against this woman. If you ever want to entertain yourself, it is quite interesting to see theologians throughout time desperately try to dismiss, reframe or soften this statement. One argument is that Jesus uses the diminutive of dog so it's not so bad, it means little dog, like a house pet, not a rabid, vicious wild dog. Scholars can't stand to see Jesus cast in a bad light. They can't see Jesus not as the hero in every story, or ever being less than perfect, in other words they can't stand it when Jesus acts human and when he doesn't neatly win every argument. But he doesn't win this one. Even after he calls her a dog and claims he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel, she persisted. "Yes but even dogs would get the crumbs that fall on the floor."

Now if we had been there when this happened we would have heard a loud collective gasp from the crowd. The audacity of this woman to argue with Jesus! But,... her words make Jesus stop and think, think about what he said just a few hours ago about how what comes out of our mouth defiles. He seems to almost immediately be delighted with the fact that this woman called him out, this persistent woman who would not be silenced, she changes his mind in a profound and transformational way. In that moment Jesus understands it is not just the Jewish people in need of healing, it is everybody. This is a very important moment in our faith story.

Now feminist theologians might stop with pointing out that the woman is the hero in this story but I say they both are. In his humanity he reveals a divine lesson. In this exchange we see one of the most important lessons we have yet to learn. **To stop, to listen, to learn, to be teachable** and Jesus shows us how to do it. So I think he can share the hero spotlight with this woman in this story. She shows courage and devotion and intelligence but he does something that for most of us is even harder. **He models how to let go of the belief system he had and celebrate a new learning.**

The woman is unnamed in this story which is very common. I think it is probably because women were considered of very little consequence in Matthew's time but still that allows every one of us to step in and be this woman. If you are a Mother or stepmother or anyone who has loved a child in need of healing whether from a physical ailment, or from addiction, mental illness, a broken heart or broken spirit you know the courage and desperation that can cause. And every one of us has been like Jesus in this story, tired, run down, just wanting a vacation from the busyness and the needs of other people. In our humanness it is very easy to lash out, to say something we regret.

We do a disservice to this story if we don't see Jesus as very human in it. So many of the other stories showcase his divinity. So let's give Jesus this one moment of humanity. Because when we embrace his humanity as much as his divinity we understand him so much better. And God would have never understood us if God was unable to understand what it is like to be human. To have faults and foibles we can't seem to change, to have human bodies that grow weary, and wear out. To possess human hearts that are so strong and passionate but so easily broken. To be born with a desire for more of everything, to need to be needed and cherished. Capable of such great courage, but also so obstinate, egotistical, and so easily manipulated by promises and by fear. To have minds that sometimes turn against us. To be capable of great achievement, beautiful dreams, and boundless empathy but also to be full of hate, envy, greed, and deceit. And to be such products of our culture, upbringing and environment, that sometimes we have to unlearn what we've been taught in order to find love for our neighbors. We want for life to make sense, for our lives to matter and to have meaning in them. And we are born with the capacity to Love greater than all these things, so much so that we would sacrifice our own lives for it.

But even on our best days all we can hope for is to be human. Always in need of grace. Jesus shows us time and time again how to be better humans through love, through widening the circle of God's grace to continue to include others and in this story and he shows us how to be better humans by listening and learning. This story is an important one. There were so many ways I could have gone with this sermon, to connect it to current events, to make it pertinent to our own lives and context. But we simply don't have time.

So I just want to leave you with some homework questions and I will leave it up to you to make connections on your own. For I believe you are a thoughtful people who make connections even when it makes you uncomfortable. I have a copy of these up here if you want them.

1. What can possess us? Addiction, obsession, selfishness, fear, ego, hate? What demons do you fight. What demons do you need healing from?
2. What woman did we see this week make a lot of noise and be called a nasty dog on the internet and cable news? Do you see a relationship between that and this scripture? Regardless of politics, how did it make you feel?
3. Who is it that we are wanting to ignore? Who bothers us? Who are we cursing? What can they teach us? are we teachable?
4. In our society do we ever hold ourselves, others or our leaders accountable to what Jesus said matters? Evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.
5. Have you ever had a transformational moment like this where you were teachable? Have you ever fought this hard to be heard?
6. Do we know when we need a break from the neediness of the world. What are our tells when we are exhausted?
7. If we were to argue with God, what would it be about?

I'm here Tuesday Mornings and Friday afternoons if you want to share your answers.
Good Luck! AMEN!

Copyright 2020 Rev. Susan Drake
All Rights Reserved



**STOP.
LISTEN.
LEARN.**

BE TEACHABLE