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The Courage to Reconsider

Matthew 15:21-28

THE INTRODUCTION

These last few weeks, we have been following the ministry of Jesus and the disciples in the gospel of Matthew. They have been traveling here and there in the region of Galilee. In chapter ten when Jesus sent the disciples out two by two, he specifically instructed them to stay within Jewish towns and territories. So Jesus has been living and teaching about the Kingdom of God, healing, feeding, and doing great deeds of power. He has gotten into controversies with the religious authorities and some cities have rejected his good news, but on the whole, he has had much success; the crowds have been continually growing. In fact, it has been extremely difficult for him and the disciples to get away to regroup and even to pray. So this week we read that Jesus breaks his own rule and goes beyond the boundaries of the Jews into Tyre and Sidon, Gentile country. Even here, people seek him out for healing.

THE READING

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22Just 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.' 23But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.' 24He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' 25But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' 26He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' 27She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' 28Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

SERMON:

Racism has been on full display recently. We have witnessed dramatic footage of white nationalists marching in Charlottesville, and heard them chant: "The Jews will not replace us! The Jews will not replace us!" I could hardly believe my eyes and ears! I didn't think I'd be seeing this again in my lifetime. **Overt racism is ugly and uncomfortable to face!**

Of course there are more subtle forms. In fact, we don't really like to label what I'm about to describe as "racism." We all hold *personal* prejudices, stereotypes, and assumptions about those that are different from us. These, our non-"PC" opinions, are the thoughts that we are more likely to keep to ourselves, or to camouflage. It is also the case that we are often blind to the structures of inequality and our own feelings of superiority.

I am not proud of this story. Probably twenty-five years ago now, I served on the search committee for the national executive of my denomination's overseas ministry. One of its priorities for the future was to strengthen the ministry's relationship with local congregations. We had many qualified candidates, and eventually it came down to a white female and a Hispanic male. During our lengthy deliberations, I recall making what I thought was a sensible point: that we should probably go for the white woman since we needed someone that our congregations could more easily understand and with whom they could relate.

Well, since I am a member of the dominant culture, there were a lot of assumptions packed into my comment! While I had friends of color, had participated in improving black/white church relations, and by then had even done some anti-racism awareness work, I was *still* assuming that the congregations to which this executive would be speaking were white like me, that the executive needed to speak English without an 'accent,' like me, and that there was no particular cross-cultural benefit to our white congregations in having a Hispanic leader! In hindsight, my bias was on full display, but *I* couldn't see it, and had anyone on the committee challenged my view at the time, I would have been flabbergasted and defensive. **Whether overt or subtle, racism is ugly and uncomfortable to face.**

Then here comes the lectionary gospel reading for today. What's on the schedule? The cross-cultural encounter between Jesus and a woman from Tyre and Sidon, of Canaanite heritage, a non-Jew, who wanted healing for her daughter. Granted, she may just have caught him at a bad time, but as a male Jew the first thing Jesus did was ignore her. When this did not dissuade her, he reiterated that his mission was limited to the children of Israel alone. As a final deterrent, he insulted her people, comparing them to "dogs!"

This text is ugly and so uncharacteristic of Jesus that it makes us uncomfortable! Across the centuries, Christian interpreters have said, "No, this just can't be," and some have tried to tone it down, for example looking at the Greek word and suggesting that "Jesus was really calling the Gentiles 'puppies' not dogs. Or that he was testing her genuineness by putting up these barriers, or as a teacher, setting up the situation in hopes that the disciples would step up to defend her." Try as we might, though, we can't deny that Jesus treated the Canaanite woman poorly, in a manner that the disciples didn't question at the time and that Matthew's Jewish Christian audience wouldn't have thought unusual. It fit their racial biases concerning Jews and Gentiles.

So why in the world would Mark and Matthew tell this story? Why not sweep this incident under the rug? I mean, not *everything* that Jesus said and did was included in these books. And **why would the church decide to keep it in the bible? Want to remember it?**

Well, I have some thoughts about this and am interested in yours. **It's when we face someone different from us, that we can face our own bias and reconsider our racism.** Such was the case for a member of the church that Steve served in Kentucky. Ginny had grown up in an era when there was a great deal of distrust between Protestants and Catholics. In fact, when she was growing up in the twenties, she would cross the street in order to stay away from a priest or

nun, believing the old tale that your milk would curdle if you got too close to a Catholic! Then in the 1980s, the Protestant and Catholic churches of our communities developed a vibrant ecumenical relationship, coming together for worship services and shared meals. This is where Ginny met Father John Goeke, and he changed her mind! He extended a hand to her, and they visited; she looked forward to seeing him at these events. This one who was different from her caused Ginny to reconsider her religious racism and turn to what really matters: Christian unity, healing, and God's compassion for *all*.

My second thought: it's also in times of trouble or conflict that we search for what is most important. For example, on Friday, in advance of yesterday's rally and counter-protest in Boston, the mayor, the commissioner, and governor led a press conference. As they spoke, I sensed how hard it was for each of them to come up with just the right words for what mattered most. I admire them for doing so in the complexity of it all. One said: "Come to the Common for the right reasons," another: "Boston does not welcome bigotry," and another: "have respect for our city as we respect your right to free speech and peaceful assembly." I heard them pleading, like the Canaanite woman, for the healing of their community.

I also found myself wondering how the church could be more of an ally in this current moral struggle, and I think we can IF we undergo the same transformation that occurred between Jesus and the Canaanite.

For when the mother from Phoenicia approached Jesus, she was the proverbial "squeaky wheel," and she never gave up! When Jesus insulted her, she offered our Lord the best comeback ever: "Even the dogs eat the crumbs from the master's table!" and it must have felt like she put a defibrillator with its two pads on his chest, her retort jolted him back into line with *God's* priorities! All those Old Testament scriptures came rushing back to him about God's love for the stranger and the outsider, all those foreigners that God commended like Ruth the Moabite, and the inclusive vision of Isaiah of God's house of prayer for *all peoples*.

The persistence of this Gentile woman enabled Jesus to turn *away* from the artificial wall that had been erected between Jews and Gentiles, and turn *toward* God's greater vision of compassion and healing for everyone! **Jesus had the courage to reconsider his pre-conceptions and turn to what really matters,** looked her in the eye, praised her faith, and healed her daughter instantly.

If the church is to become a more proactive partner on the things that matter most, it *needs* the Canaanite woman! I know I could have used her when I was on that search committee! Wish that I had studied this text then. Likewise, it is the courage to reconsider our own shortcomings that will turn the church into the ally that our nation needs, becoming with other faiths the house of prayer for all peoples. Christians retained this passage in the bible so that they too could have access to the woman from Tyre and Sidon.

I'm sure she thanked Jesus for healing her daughter, and I imagine Jesus saying, "No. Thank YOU!"