

Aug 20, 2017 Isaiah 56: 1-18, Ps 67, Matthew 15: 21-28

Determination to Reach Across Boundaries

God is in the business of meeting outsiders and granting them not just a crumb, but a place at the table. The story of the Canaanite woman, an outsider, is one of only two examples when Jesus reaches out across the boundary of Jew and Gentile to bring God's healing touch. She is an example of persistence and determination in faith, someone who reveals the grand reach of God's vision for us, but even for Jesus himself.

This indeed is considered one of the more difficult texts in the New Testament for the way it portrays Jesus as a man who didn't fully grasp yet how wide God's vision of inclusion really was, to allow it to inform his reach not just to Jews, to the lost people of Israel, but to gentiles and people of foreign lands and religions.

It seems that Jesus was off in foreign territory, Tyre and Sidon, maybe to escape the pressures of his work in Galilee, so he was less than open to the Canaanite woman who approached him for help. He was annoyed with her request and his disciples joined in with rejection, willingly acting out the normal attitudes of their day. There was a crowd mentality going on there for sure, and we are surprised to hear that even Jesus seemed to have been acting out of the social attitudes of his own male Jewish culture.

We know so well how this crowd mentality can sweep people up into reacting negatively to people who are outsiders, who are different. In the marches and protests acted out so tragically in Charlottesville, Virginia earlier this week, we have seen how these bigoted attitudes can lead to acts of terrible violence especially when groups solidify their positions based only on hatred and fear. Heather Heyer, a woman who was known to actively protest against such racial hatred, paid the ultimate price as she was mowed down by a car used as a weapon as were others who suffered injury.

The resurgence of groups such as the KKK and Neo-Nazi groups both in the US and even in our own country is causing so much anger, disappointment and hurt here in North America and around the world. Some of you are part of the generation that supported the cause of World War 11, whether you fought in active duty, saw a loved one go to war and

not return, or provided for the war effort back home in Canada. We even have our own memorial plaques with the names of men from this congregation who were willing to fight against hatred and fear which was based on race, religion, ethnicity and politics.

We have seen further examples of this vicious hatred based on fear of others who do not share similar religious and cultural views acted out in Barcelona, Spain, an act of terror claimed by ISIL. They are convinced somehow that these acts of violence and destruction will turn people to believe in the God of hate and fear that they are promoting through their corrupted view of Islam. Our hearts I know are all raw and opened with compassion to share in the pain that so many people are bearing as they say goodbye to loved ones who were tragically killed. I can tell you I am so glad that my daughter Jess, Micah and Winnie have safely returned from a two and a half week vacation in southern France, as I worried everyday if they would be caught up in some random act of violence. Given that Micah and little Winn are Jewish also deepens the sting of the anti-Semitic slogans and protests.

So how do we make sense of all the chaos and violence that seems to be erupting all around us? Do we retreat in fear? Are we in danger of letting that fear take hold of our own hearts so that we are vulnerable to those more extreme voices who focus their hatred in acts that create more fear and harm. Is this not a time for each of us to reflect more deeply on those wounds, those ‘demon’s that are tormenting us either now or in our own past?

After all that is what is at the heart of today’s story in the gospel, the story of a daughter who is tormented by a demon whose mother longs for her freedom and health. Even though we may use different terminology today based on language of mental health, it almost amounts to the same thing. With all that has been happening in our world recently on many fronts, it sometimes feels like many demons have been unleashed at once. And so with the Canaanite woman, we cry out “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David”.

So why did Jesus not respond to her immediately as we would have expected him to do? Why did he utter such harsh and unkind words to her, saying the “it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”? It was one of the questions that has several answers put forward by scholars and no one answer really satisfies as it seems they all are left scratching their heads. No matter how those words are translated or interpreted, they are really words of cruelty and malice that this woman did not deserve from the lips of anyone.

Are we perhaps seeing Jesus here in his full humanity, a man who shared in the racial prejudices of his own Jewish culture who would not acknowledge this foreigner, especially a woman? Was this story kept in the gospels because it shows how Jesus cleverly tested the faith of this woman? Was it more of an ‘accident’ that this story is even included in the gospel by Matthew? Scholars do not agree on one answer to this question but they can agree that it was Paul’s vision that extended the reach of the message of God’s kingdom to the gentiles, not so much Jesus’ work, because he felt that his call was primarily to the lost sheep of Israel.

Yet it is through the determined voice of this Canaanite woman, this foreigner, that Jesus’ heart is widened to be able to see that she and her daughter are also to be recipients of God’s grace and healing love. Deep in her heart she knows that this God whom we also worship welcomes all people to the Table of Life, that God does desire full, free and abundant life for all people no matter their country of origin, their race, their gender, their social status.

It takes a lot of deep soul work, apparently even for our very human Jesus, to learn how to embody that vision of God’s love and acceptance in our own lives, in our own hearts. As we grapple with the increasing atmosphere of fear and hatred, people are starting to come forward with their own struggles of how they have overcome racism in their own lives, how they are finding healing for the deep wounds that fostered the hatred in them

in the first place. The Ottawa Citizen carried a powerful story in Friday's paper (Aug 18th) of Elizabeth Moore, a woman who was a member of a Neo-Nazi group here in Ontario in the mid 90's and in fact was the spokesperson for a group called the Neo-Nazi Heritage Front. I will let her speak of her own truth:

Her involvement with that radical group began when she was in a racially diverse high school in Scarborough and was involved in a 200 strong march held here on the streets of Ottawa in 1993. She fell into that group which had simplistic answers for her when she could not emotionally navigate her feelings of alienation as the often only white kid in her class. Needless to say her parents were devastated as her father had grown up in England during the Nazi Blitz. It was when she was attending Queens University in the mid 90's that she began to question her involvement in that group, especially as the spokesperson and the person who talked about 'fake news' even at that time. "I realized the only thing that any of us had in common was who we hate. And I realized I didn't want my life to be about that."

She courageously reached out to Bernie Farber, who was the head of the Canadian Jewish Congress who was at the university to deliver a lecture on hate groups and anti-Semitism. He corrected her knowledge and encouraged her to cut ties with the group she was so embroiled in. She then began to speak publicly about her experience and the dangers of being in such a group and in response to the question of how a person from such a good home could get involved in such extremism. She is now married to a Jewish man and for awhile considered converting to Judaism but has learned that she needs to really understand and deal with her 'whiteness' and the privilege that comes with that.

Like the Canaanite woman of ancient days, she continues persists in being that person who fights against hatred, who works to nurture a family and a community to lift up the banner of love that welcomes all people, to help people discover a sense of power that is based on love and not what she learned was the false power of hate.

It is helpful to remind ourselves that as a congregation we have articulated was feels like a call to becoming an inter-cultural church. This can mean many things but it is a call to welcome people of all backgrounds, races, genders, cultures, varied abilities, those who seek healing and a renewed vision for living their lives. My hope is that we can be a community of safety, a group of people who seek to live out the vision of God's shalom, peace and welcoming love. I hope that we can also be people who can courageously support each other as we seek understanding and healing for the wounds within ourselves that might be the seeds that could lead us to harbour hatred and fear for others, even for ourselves.

The Canaanite woman was a blessed woman because she was sure within herself that both she and her daughter were worthy to come to God's table, worthy to receive the powerful touch of God's love. She even transformed the heart of Jesus so that he could now see his own work in a new way with a broader reach. Jesus himself broke through some boundary within himself that allowed God's power to then flow freely through him. Immediately her daughter was healed.

That mother had a clear vision and she was persistent and determined that God's love could reach across the deepest hurdles and historical boundaries entrenched in fear and hate. Her actions and her determination should give us hope.

I pray that each of us here will be just a determined and persistent in breaking down the boundaries that divide us and will recommit ourselves to finding those words, those acts of mercy and grace that will one day ensure that God's kingdom of peace, respect, and abundant life for all becomes a reality.