

A Change of Heart

A sermon preached by

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Matthew 15:21-28

²¹Jesus 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.

Throughout much of the biblical record, stories of racial and ethnic difference punctuate the narratives. Much like the world we live in today, the people of the Old and New Testaments were ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse, with a large number of languages, customs, and religious beliefs. Many of the Bible's stories are examples of the ways that people of faith are struggling with these differences, who's local and who is foreign, elite or marginalized, friend or enemy. And like today's world and today's conversations, the bias and prejudice toward "the other" comes out often. Then as now, these prejudices touched upon issues of ethnicity, skin color, one's native language, and the resulting accent in one's speech.

In Genesis, Rebekah exclaims her frustration at Esau's wives because of their ethnicity: "I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living." In Deuteronomy (7) the definition of being "The Chosen People" includes purging the land of other nations, people who are not the people of Israel: Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Jebusites, in all seven nations that are mightier and more numerous. "Make no covenant with them, show them no mercy, don't let your children intermarry with them." So, the stories of native peoples being purged from their lands has a long a painful history that has some roots in our own scriptures. And let's be clear: in some cases white supremacists have misused these stories and their

contexts to justify their own evil and hate filled rhetoric. The acquiescence of the church to Nazi ideology and the resulting creation of a “Reich Church” in pre-war Germany is a prime example of this.

Last Saturday, the death of Heather Heyer and Berke Bates and Jay Cullen, the two state troopers that died in a helicopter crash, are all attributable to this evil ideology. They are only the most recent in a whole history of hatred and genocide that is a large part of our human history. In the United States, we share this history of hatred and we must first accept this reality before we can seek reconciliation, forgiveness, and restitution.

Yet one of the things that is often missed in the interpretation of our scriptures is that even in the ancient times of the Old Testament, there were stories being told and recorded that challenged these assumptions of exclusion and hatred. At the same time that our scriptures tell stories of exclusion and separation, there are counter narratives that confront ideologies of racial and ethnic purity. In the Book of Ruth, a foreign Moabite woman becomes the example of faithfulness, loyalty, and kindness. In the story of Jonah, he goes to the foreign people of Nineveh and much to his surprise -- and let's face it, dismay -- they are saved.

In an article about diversity in the Bible¹ Frank Chan makes the assertion that ethnic and racial diversity was always God's intention for humanity. While captive in Egypt, a culture that believed that only their race was of God, the Israelites believed that all of humanity descended from God. Chan argues that the story of the Tower of Babel is not punishment against the people of the city but instead is a benevolent correction by God to keep humankind from remaining fixed in one location. In this sense God is behind the diversity, not opposed to it. Because you see the folks from Babel had a slogan going around, “Make Babel Great Again,” and they were building a tower. God said, enough of that malarkey, I am taking you back to the

¹ Frank Chan, “Biblical Materials for a Theology of Cultural Diversity: A Proposal,” in Annie N. Mundeke, ed., *Understanding Diversity: Theological Views on Diversity* (Dubuque: Kendall / Hunt Publications, 2005), 139-147.

diversity which I intended. When Moses led his people out of Egypt, it was a racially mixed crowd that he led. Specifically mentioned are the Cushites (Africans), who are fully included as members of the covenant people.

So, when Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, a ministry that is very much defined by his reaching out to people of different cultural, religious, and ethnic identities, he is likely following the example of the minority reports that show up in the Torah. His *Parable of the Good Samaritan* is a direct and profound demonstration of radical inclusiveness set in the context of extreme hatred and division between the Samaritans and the Jews of his time.

All this background brings us to this morning's gospel story, which if you haven't noticed, I've been trying to avoid. If there is any one gospel story that is completely befuddling, it is this story of the Canaanite woman's encounter with Jesus. It is a puzzling, maddening, embarrassing story that certainly doesn't put Jesus in a very positive light. This story is a challenging Gospel reading, especially during a time of such deep and profound divisions about race and ethnicity in America. Jesus compares a Canaanite woman and her tormented daughter to "dogs?" The woman's race and ethnicity are center stage. She is different from Jesus, the Jew. Initially he completely ignores her, doesn't even acknowledge that she is there. This is the ultimate in disrespect: she isn't even worthy of rebuke. Then finally he says the equivalent of, "I don't have time for 'your kind' of people."

The disciples, annoyed by her begging, ask that she be sent away. And then Jesus' response is hard to understand in light of all that we have come to know of him. I don't know about you, but I'm pretty tempted to say; "This is not **my** Jesus."

But we struggle with the idea that Jesus was as fully human as he was divine. We wonder how this kind of prejudice can come out of Jesus' mouth. But if we truly believe in Jesus' humanity, then maybe we might consider the possibility that this was a "teachable moment" for *him*. Maybe Jesus was the one who needed to be taught. And the Canaanite woman was the vessel for this powerful teaching. Perhaps this is a way for the Gospel writer to say, if Jesus can have a change of heart, then so can you. A change of heart like John Newton,

who as a young man worked on slave ships, converted to Christianity, and then wrote, “Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” Or Shannon Martinez, an ex-Nazi, who founded “Life After Hate,” a Chicago-based group that helps people leave white extremist groups.

For us, the constant struggle of our lives is to follow Jesus’ example and learn that to be fully human is to change, to evolve, to be touched, moved, and sometimes to be reluctantly dragged into another way of being, thinking, or action. Too often we refuse to empathize with people whose experience is different from our own. If the oppression, injustice, or pain is not happening in our house and neighborhood or does not impact *our* race, gender, class, sexuality, or orientation, then we dismiss it as unwelcomed, unjustified noise.

Jesus’ response to the apostles’ urging him to send the Canaanite woman away seems to affirm their desire to dismiss her: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Even the fact that her people’s blood runs through his veins and that his people’s blood runs through her veins does not move Jesus! If our common humanity, our relatedness, does not move us, what will?

Yet the Canaanite woman persists. Like Sarah, Ruth, Mary, Sojourner Truth, Diane Nash, Ruby Sales, and Rosa Parks, the Canaanite woman persisted. So many anonymous women like the Canaanite woman have persisted as lone minority voices among a majority of authoritative and powerful men. Still, she persisted! She didn’t go away; she won’t be dismissed. She draws closer and kneels, and in the vernacular of a determined woman she cries, “Master, help me.” Her plea for help is met with the language of cultural difference and distance: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

If there is anything that this story supports, it is that change is painfully difficult to accomplish, even for Jesus. But finally, slowly, grudgingly, Jesus relents, his heart is changed. Perhaps, the veil has been finally lifted from his own prejudice. Perhaps he suddenly sees her pain, her circumstance, and he is moved. Maybe there is a prick of conscience or a still small voice that he, at long last, hears. Perhaps the divine nature that is within him is moved by the

divine one who wills love and acceptance for all and he is moved to announce that her faith has wrought this change. At last, she is accepted, recognized, affirmed...and healing takes place. And I believe that both of them are changed and made to be the whole people of God they are meant to be.

Perhaps this is the lesson of the gospel writers: that only when the heart is changed, can the world be changed as well. And we as Christians in this time and place are called to confront, in the words of our baptismal liturgy, *evil, oppression and injustice in whatever forms they present themselves*. The choice today is very clear...will we choose darkness or will we choose light...will we choose death or will we choose life?

Choose life, choose life, choose life. AMEN

1 Frank Chan, "Biblical Materials for a Theology of Cultural Diversity: A Proposal," in Annie N. Mundeke, ed., *Understanding Diversity: Theological Views on Diversity* (Dubuque: Kendall / Hunt Publications, 2005), 139-147.