

Rev. Lynne Ogren
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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
10th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

Matthew 15:21-28

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Eric and I have started watching the Netflix series called “Designated Survivor.” The main character had been serving as the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and suddenly becomes the President of the United States after a major catastrophe.

We’re about halfway through the first season and it has been interesting to see how the writers are developing the characters who are thrown into their new positions. I’ve noticed how things are changing in the relationship between the new president and his wife, in particular. They are a couple who share everything, but because of national security, he can’t talk to her about every detail anymore.

She is seeing her husband become more assertive and decisive, often making decisions she doesn’t agree with. Every now and then he is different than the man she once knew and that seems to be unsettling for her.

In our gospel reading today Jesus is shone in a different light than we are used to. He doesn’t speak the way we might expect him to speak. He even seems to change his mind toward the Canaanite woman. Is it even possible for the Son of God to change his mind?

We like to give Jesus all wisdom, all power, all compassion—everything we know we are not. In fact, over the last couple of chapters in Matthew’s gospel we have seen Jesus put the needs of others before himself, as he responds to a crowd in need of healing and then provides more than enough food for them.

Then he calmed the stormy sea and his disciples declared his majesty as the Son of God.

But today...today our passage is confusing. Jesus seems to agree with the disciples who see the Canaanite woman as a bother. She is a foreigner, NOT one of God’s chosen people. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” Jesus says to her. Then when she gets on her knees and begs for his mercy, it sounds like Jesus calls her a dog, less than human. That’s not the Jesus I know!

My Jesus is kind. My Jesus shows his followers how to welcome and care for outsiders—like the Samaritan woman at the well, or Zacchaeus the tax collector, or even the untouchables, like those with leprosy. His ministry is rarely exclusive to the Jewish community. Even when he teaches in the synagogues or gathers his twelve Jewish disciples, he sends them out to whoever will welcome them, no strings attached.

Why would Jesus refer to the desperate Canaanite woman as a dog? Why would he seem so dismissive? I want to explain Jesus’ words in a better light for you. I want him to be the Jesus I have constructed in my mind. Today’s passage doesn’t look like that Jesus much at all.

I certainly can't know the mind of Jesus any better than you can, or why Matthew would have included this encounter in his gospel. But we can't pick and choose the passages that only align with our desired image of Jesus. Today we are forced to read something unsettling and try to see what God might be saying to us.

First, we can remember that Matthew thought it was important to include four women in Jesus' genealogy back in the first chapter of this gospel, and at least three of these were not women of Israel. The Magi were the first people to come and worship the infant Jesus as a king, and they came from a foreign land. And in today's reading, Jesus has intentionally entered into Gentile territory.

Even though Matthew is clear to point out that Jesus' ministry comes from his Jewish heritage, this gospel is sprinkled with the blessing God first gave to Abraham when God said, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:2, 3b)

Again and again, Jesus teaches and preaches to his own people to help them grow as ministers of the Gospel for the sake of the world.

Second, perhaps our reading today should focus less on Jesus and more on the disciples and the Canaanite woman. The disciples' first reaction to the desperate woman is to send her away. They didn't really learn much from their previous experience with the crowd who needed to be fed. They wanted to send them away, too.

How often do we find ourselves turning away from the needs in the world? My mailbox and email are inundated with the cries of the hungry and poor. How many can I help? How do I decide which organizations are worthy and which ones need to be discarded, because there is only so much I can give? Like the disciples we hear the cries of those in need, but we don't—and can't—respond to all of them.

But this woman is undeterred! She has heard of Jesus. She knows his reputation as a healer and as a man of God. Even though her people do not believe in the God of Abraham and are not descended from King David, she is willing to run after Jesus, to call out to him by the title his believers have given him, and to even bow at his feet—all for the sake of her child.

I don't know that I have ever prayed with that kind of conviction and persistence. This woman sees in Jesus the possibility of hope and healing and new life and she will not give up until he gives it to her.

Maybe Jesus is being honest about his purpose or his limits. Jesus heals many people in the Bible, but we know that not everyone is healed. Sometimes he leaves a town before the long line of the sick and lame has had their chance to see him.

Or maybe Jesus is living out what he has been trying to teach his disciples.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” This woman is certainly poor in spirit, and eventually the kingdom of heaven becomes hers through faith.

“Blessed are the pure in heart,” Jesus taught, “for they will see God.” The Canaanite woman saw in Jesus the power and presence of God.

The disciples saw this person as wholly other—a Gentile, a woman, a person in deep need. May in this encounter Jesus is holding up a mirror to our human prejudices. When he first ignores her, then rejects her, and then demeans her we can see these same attitudes in ourselves. It is embarrassing and humbling.

And finally, this encounter between Jesus and the desperate Canaanite mother might encourage us to focus even more intentionally on our relationship with Jesus. Have we put Jesus in our tidy little box? Is my relationship with Jesus just about him serving me and my needs?

Can we argue with Jesus about the injustices in the world? Can we trust that his power is meant for all people? For whom do we bring our prayers—for our family and friends? That’s good and important. But what about the bigger issues? Can we trust that God is at work to feed the world, to end pandemics, to bring peace to ALL nations? Can we pray as if our lives and the lives of those we love depend on God’s power and presence?

This story can open us up to grow in our relationship with Jesus. Relationships only grow deeper through time spent together, struggling through difficult times and decisions, and asking the hard questions of one another. The Canaanite woman shows us that Jesus can take the hard questions and the struggles we have in life and in our faith.

I hope our understanding of Jesus isn’t wrapped up in a tidy little package. He is bigger and more complex than our finite, human hearts and minds can comprehend. And yet, in Jesus God has come near, and the kingdom of God that is based on God’s mercy and justice has come near.

May we grow in faith that this mercy and justice are not only for us, but for us to share with all people.

Thanks be to God. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Confident of God's care and helped by the Holy Spirit, we pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

A brief silence.

Lord, you gather the church to be part of your mission as ambassadors of Jesus Christ. As Jesus acknowledged the great faith of a woman from outside his people, help your church discover and find blessing in the faith of people we do know yet know or understand.

Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

You have blessed us with the bounty of the earth. Grant your grace to all your creatures, that the earth will flourish. Bless fields and streams, forests and seas with abundance for all. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

Let your way be known among all the nations of the world, now divided by competing interests, contending alliances, and consumed by enormous worry. We cry out for healing and a cure for this coronavirus. We beg you to provide food and shelter for the poor and oppressed. We long for your peace and justice here and in every place. Bless us to be your servants, and make your face shine upon all peoples. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

You show unexpected mercy, kindness, and generosity. We pray for those who are in need your healing of body, mind, or spirit, especially those we know and love. *pause*

Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

In you we live and move and have our being. Grant our congregation the grace to find our life refreshed in you. As we prepare for an uncertain future in the midst of this pandemic strengthen us for mission in your name. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

In the certain hope that nothing can separate us from your love, we offer these prayers to you; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.