

Sermon: A Lesson for Jesus?  
11 Pentecost, Year A  
Matthew 15:10-28

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When I was a child one of my favorite toys was a wooden puzzle of the United States. I loved figuring out where each different colored state was and locking it in place. Growing up on Lookout Mountain, I lived in Tennessee just a few hundred yards from the Georgia border. I remember being strangely surprised and disappointed to discover one day that there no actual line drawn on the land that told me where TN ended and Georgia began. The boundary line was theoretical but not visually there.

Boundaries can be good and necessary in certain elements of life. Sometimes boundaries can keep us safe and healthy. Yet sometimes the boundaries we create as human beings can be vehicles for destruction and great harm. In Matthew's gospel passage of today, the Canaanite woman and Jesus are operating within an array of social boundaries. Jesus, enters the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman starts shouting at him, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David. My daughter is tormented by a demon." So much divides them - boundaries of ethnicity, heritage, religion, gender and demon possession. Jesus is a Jew, and she a Canaanite, a Gentile, a woman, a mother whose daughter is mentally ill.

In that era and culture ALL of those things could divide and separate. Yet, the woman, in her crisis of need, is not deterred. At first Jesus responds with silence, seems to ignore her. He doesn't answer her at all. And his disciples urge him, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting at us." And Jesus says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Oh, come on, Jesus, really? Is this the Jesus I think I know and love? But she persists, and moves from shouting at him to kneeling before him saying, "Lord, help me." And Jesus replies, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." What is wrong with you, Jesus? Maybe you were better off keeping quiet! And we are left outraged, surprised and confused. Jesus is referring to the woman and her daughter as dogs? And then the woman brings Jesus to his senses, teaches him and reminds him of who he is and who God is, the Merciful One. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters' table." And he heals her daughter and he commends the woman for her great faith.

Sheesh! This is a difficult text. A reminder that life is messy and that we can't always tie Jesus up in a nice neat bow. Maybe he had something to learn or maybe he was approaching this situation in a playful manner and always had planned to help her. We may never know for sure. We can't always understand the workings of God. But one very cool and wonderful and amazing thing that happens in this text is that the woman persists in naming very clearly the reality of God's nature, that God in Jesus IS merciful, that God in Jesus IS Just, that God is Jesus IS loving. And we have some very deep truths to apply to our own situation here in Staunton, Virginia, today, one week after the very troubling mayhem in our sister city of Charlottesville.

Some of the very same social boundaries that the people of first century Palestine contended with are still with us. The crisis in Charlottesville points to a deeper crisis of our nation, and indeed throughout the world. In this crisis we do have an opportunity to be clear in who we are as God's people. This opportunity is for us as Christians to name racism as a sin, to condemn hatred, bigotry, and violence that was so visible and concrete in word and deed last weekend. Our opportunity in this moment is to plainly and unequivocally state that the sentiments of the White Supremacists, the Ku Klux Klan and Neo-Nazis are wrong. Just plain wrong. And they go against the God who is just and merciful and loving to all people – people of all religions and no religion, people of all colors, all cultures, all ages, whatever their gender or sexual orientation.

No doubt, some of those white supremacists see themselves as Christians but as I heard this week, “Bad theology kills people.”

Last weekend we witnessed the darkest instincts of the human heart as white supremacists walked the lawn of UVA with their tiki torches chanting obscene and hate-filled chants that Friday night and even more so on Saturday as hate filled words turned into acts of violence. Freedom of speech bumped up against violence inciting speech. Hurtful words too often moved into hurtful acts.

We have also witnessed an absence of moral leadership in this country and in that absence we have the opportunity to lead, and in that opportunity to lead we have decisions to make. Will we be bridge builders through love or add to the destruction of hatred? We have the ability to set the tone in every situation we find ourselves – in our homes, in our work places, in our neighborhoods, in our church. Will it be a tone of complacency through silence or active engagement that allows hatred to be tolerated, or will it be a tone born out of our baptismal covenant that respects the humanity and dignity of every human being?

Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry wrote this week, “I ask and invite us as congregations and individuals who are together the Episcopal Church of the Jesus Movement to intentionally, purposely, and liturgically rededicate ourselves to the way of Jesus, the work of racial reconciliation, the work of healing and dismantling everything that wounds and divides us, the work of becoming God’s Beloved Community.”

This week, I ask you to pray, to sit with or kneel before God with an open heart, to ask God what are the boundary lines of your own heart that divide you from others and keep you from loving them. Ask God to help – to help both you as an individual as well as us as a community to learn how to love without boundaries. Like the Canaanite woman we must persist in clearly calling forth and participating in the work of justice and mercy and love. You may find God is calling you to speak, to write, to stand with someone who is being discriminated against, to advocate for those on the margins, to demonstrate, perhaps to do something you haven’t done before. Get ready to be surprised by God. This is not a time for complacency.

In today’s remarkable passage from Matthew, we encounter an unrecognizable Jesus, who is actually rude and is taught a lesson by a Canaanite woman. If Jesus still had lessons to learn, can we learn, too?

May this Charlottesville crisis be a watershed moment where with God’s help, we will not allow hatred to prevail. Love will be the word.

Amen.