

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, August 20, 2023

“Us vs. Them: Insiders and Outsiders”

Today's gospel message is a challenging one for preachers. I am a member of an online clergy group, and there was a post in that group earlier this week about this Gospel message, and one person said they actually have a note on their calendar to take vacation during this week in the lectionary. Many others had similar sentiments. But why were so many pastors reluctant to preach on this passage?

Well, because we hear in this Gospel message what sounds to us today like a Jesus we don't particularly like. And obviously, we're Christians, and we want to like Jesus all the time. So we want to go about justifying his behavior toward this Canaanite woman to make ourselves feel better about this passage.

It helps, I think, to understand what is going on here a little bit better. It is not our job to blindly accept everything Jesus does as perfect, nor anyone else for that matter. It's also not our job to blindly do as someone else does without thinking about how it might affect other people. It is our job to ask questions of what we read in the Bible and try to better understand what's happening.

So, let's start by calling out what we hear in this passage that feels challenging. The Canaanite woman is shouting for Jesus to have mercy on her - loudly and without shame, and Jesus is ignoring her completely. Not only is Jesus ignoring her, but his disciples are urging him to send this woman away because, essentially, she's annoying them.

To our ears, by today's standards, this part of the interaction sounds pretty appalling. But Jesus is going by an old script for interactions such as this one - a script based on tradition and an us vs. them mentality that is deeply rooted in societal customs and tribal mores. They are in foreign territory, and everyone is a little more on edge being outside of the comfort of their typical community.

But to the faithful members of the Gospel writer, Matthew's community, Jesus reacts to the woman's request just as they would expect a rabbi to respond. This woman represents Israel's ancient enemy - the Canaanites! Traditional religious practices and prejudices, which were designed to guide Israel's relationship with “outsiders” and “enemies”, would support his dismissal of her desperate concern for her daughter.

Jesus initially replies not to the woman directly but to his disciples, telling them that he was not sent to work with anyone but the house of Israel, thus upholding these community prejudices. This woman is none of his concern and is not worth his time or energy because she is not a member of his flock. But, she persists. She kneels in front of him, begging him to help her. From here, it gets worse: Jesus insults her. She looks to him like a dog begging for crumbs under the table.

Jesus says: “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” In other words, he was sent only to be a shepherd of a particular flock, and it isn't fair for his skills and abilities, his healing powers and his gifts, to be used on people who are not a member of that flock. He also implies here that she is far beneath those he came to help - akin to a dog.

Jesus is participating in ritualized humiliation of this woman, and this makes us feel a bit uncomfortable. The woman responds by acknowledging that tradition *does* hold that his people

- the Israelites - would see her as a dog. She doesn't try to defend her status in his society. But then she seems to turn the conversation on its head by saying "but even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from the table."

We don't hear if there is a pause, or even some laughter at this comment. We don't get to know if Jesus smiles at her, chuckling because he realized she not only won the argument but she also changed his mind. It might have been nice to see that side of Jesus' humanity, but Matthew doesn't find it important to share this information with us.

This is one moment in Matthew's Gospel when we see Jesus learning something new, and, as a result, he becomes someone different. His humanity is on full display in this passage, and it is not a lot different than the interactions we experience with people today.

I'll share a quick story to highlight just one experience I had with a culture of "us vs. them" and with one group of people telling me how awful someone else was. I worked at a continuing care retirement facility when I was in college, as a receptionist on the second shift. There were, of course, second shift nurses and CNAs who I worked with regularly, and it was a tight-knit group of people.

They were the "in group," if you will, and first shift workers - and in particular the maintenance supervisor - were the "out group", or the "other." I was told from my first day on the job how awful the maintenance supervisor was to work with, how no one on second shift liked him, and how they thought he was just biding his time until retirement.

He was lazy, unhelpful, and never answered when they called him. Their attitude was much like the disciples and even Jesus toward this Canaanite woman - he was akin to a dog who didn't deserve their time or energy or kindness.

But, guess what? I never actually had a problem with the maintenance supervisor. Had I let my co-workers dictate my own opinion of him, I probably wouldn't have liked him either. But, I found him to be quite a nice guy, he was always helpful to me, always answered when I called him, and we got along very well while I worked there.

We very often have similar experiences in our lives. We become part of the "in group" or the "us" from an early age with regard to lots of different situations. We are part of a family - the "us" that is set apart from everyone else. Family is often set above all others, and it can be very difficult to work against this, even if our family does not treat us the best.

It is possible to become the person in your family that feels like the outcast - the black sheep, the other.

We also see this happen in school when we become part of a friend group, but don't belong to other friend groups. It happens in our careers - as demonstrated by my example of the maintenance supervisor.

And, believe it or not, it happens in churches. We like to think that church is the one place that should be welcoming to everyone. The one place that we should not feel an us vs. them, insider vs. outsider mentality. After all, Jesus told us to love our neighbours as ourselves. And yet, we see in today's Gospel passage that at least in this instance, Jesus really didn't mean neighbours outside of the Israelite community, at least not initially.

At least, that's how it appears from this passage, and it's what we know about the community that Matthew is concerned with in his Gospel. But we very clearly see Jesus change his mind,

learn something new, and recognize that the flock he thought he was sent to was actually much larger than he originally thought.

We see him realize in this moment that even people outside of the flock of Israel are worthy of his gifts, of his love and care, and of his saving grace. This passage could have been left out - Matthew could have glossed over it or excluded it, but it's an important one because it shows us Jesus's humanity, and it gives us pause to look at our own lives and relationships.

It gives us pause as a church as well to ask ourselves if there are ways that our church maintains tradition and customs that create an us vs. them environment without even realizing it. In what ways does our church hold tight to ways of doing things that might exclude others who are different from us? Or, that might cause visitors or outsiders to feel unwelcome or uncomfortable.

The disciples could not empathize with this woman. They were too biased by tradition, societal customs and norms, and their own ways of doing things. They could not see her as anything other than a dog. This Canaanite woman does not even get to be named in this passage. Even Jesus took more than a moment to remove the veil from his eyes.

What might it take, then, for a church community to be able to see from an outsider's perspective? To be able to look at the ways we might be treating people as "other" even when we don't necessarily intend to do so? Are there ways we can approach our church and our community as outsiders to better understand how someone from outside the community might see us?

These are the questions that this passage invites us to ask about ourselves. And these questions can apply to situations outside of our church environment as well, of course. It is an example of Jesus's humanity that calls to light our own humanity - our own prejudices. Our own family systems and societal norms that create a sense of meaning for us, but also a sense of belonging that may not apply to outsiders.

The Canaanite woman accepts that she is an outsider - she accepts that Jesus and people like him regarded Canaanites as wild dogs. She does not presume to be invited to the table, but she does wonder if she could at least gather the scraps that fall from the table.

Looking at it from her perspective, under what circumstances have we felt like we were treated as less than - as unworthy? It certainly is sad to know that this woman accepts that not only is she not welcome to the table, but she is no better than a dog that scavenges for scraps. Our sensibilities today look at this passage and feel simply awful for her.

No one should be treated like that. But here we see Jesus, of all people, treat her this way! And yet, how often do we treat others this way - perhaps more subtly - without even realizing it? We might not outright insult them, but in what ways do we make people feel like the "other" without knowing we make them feel that way?

These are questions worth asking ourselves as we leave here today. But, perhaps more importantly, we should remember that Jesus was able to remove the veil of tradition. Even he had an element of humanity that we experience ourselves. Through her persistence, the Canaanite woman was able to help Jesus recognize truth when he heard it.

He saw a gentile ready to be part of a flock much larger than the one he thought he was sent to. He realized in this moment that his flock was expanding before his eyes. So the good news from this challenging passage is that **if** even Jesus can have prejudices based on societal

customs and norms, and **if** even Jesus can change his mind, learn something new, and grow and evolve, then so can we.

This may be a difficult passage to read and to preach, but I think seeing Jesus' humanity is important for us. It helps us to be able to look at ourselves and our world differently. Through his example, we can see that perfection was never the goal. Being open to change, learning, and growth is the goal.

Moravian Bishop Chris Giesler, in his preaching message this week, reminds us that "at the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says: 'Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations.' This means everyone, not just those who look, speak, or act like you - all people."

Bishop Giesler closes his message by saying, "in our world today of deepening division along racial, ethnic, political, and religious lines, today's text should cause us to wake up. Jesus' witness is vital as we seek to unite people. This is the very foundation of mission." I would argue it is the very foundation of our faith. Amen.

Let us pray. God of mercy and grace, we offer our thanks for sending your son Jesus Christ to demonstrate for us the ways in which we can grow as people, evolve in our ways of thinking and seeing the world, and overcome learned biases toward anyone we were taught to consider as the "other."

We pray today that you would help us to remove the veil from our eyes, expand our own minds, and open up our world to see the larger picture of unity and love that you would have us see. We ask that you would help us to see things we have been unable to see in ourselves and our world, and that you would walk with us when we struggle to lift the veil or when we unknowingly stick to traditions and customs that cause us to "other" another person or group of people.

May we see clearly, may we be grateful for Jesus' example, and may we learn to grow in faith and acceptance of others. All of this we pray in your name. Amen.