

Matthew 15:10-28

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Samantha Evans

August 16, 2020

## Facing Our Prejudice

Well, friends, let me just start by saying that this particular encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite, or in the Gospel of Mark, the Syrophenician woman, is in my opinion, the most cringe-worthy text in Scripture.

There are some shockers in Scripture, don't get me wrong, but usually you can kind of explain it away because it's Paul going on one of Paul's rants, or it's one of the laws in the Hebrew Scriptures that we are either misinterpreting, or were put there by people in power trying to keep power. I guess the point is that there is usually some very human intermediary, with very human prejudice, which can help to explain why the text might not actually reveal the will or ways of God.

But this one, well, this is straight from the horse's mouth, especially if you believe in the full divinity of Christ. In fact, this episode makes that whole theological belief about Christ being perfect and without sin, pretty complicated.

And what's worse is that Jesus says this vile and hurtful thing to a woman, a desperate mother, right after he challenges the Pharisees and teaches his followers that what you say has the power to defile you.

I guess you could explain Jesus' behavior by saying that he was testing the woman or providing his disciples with an object lesson about the parable he just taught. But either way, I personally cannot accept any justification for this kind of behavior, and I would actually like to suggest to you today that Jesus doesn't either.

You see, after lobbing this horrific insult at this woman, and hearing her response, Jesus says only, "Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

There's no... "Well, actually..." or "I didn't mean..." or "Let me rephrase that..."

There is simply an acknowledgement that she is right, and he is wrong. There is something in her faith, some kind of deeper understanding that had been granted to her, but for some reason Jesus had missed. And now because of her, her faith and her experience and her understanding, Jesus comes to learn and understand something about himself and his Father, something that he did not know before.

I am going to get into this a little more so that you have a better understanding about why I've come to these conclusions, but before that I just want to name that this episode, and Jesus' behavior in particular provides a certain grace and a model for us on how to, as the sermon is titled: Face our Prejudice.

The grace is that even Jesus got it wrong, so it's okay when we fail to understand the fullness of God's vision for us and the world. And the model is that when we are confronted with this reality, we are invited to respond like Jesus, with an acceptance and a willingness to adjust who we think we are and what we think we are supposed to be doing.

A grace and a model for How to Face our own Prejudice.

Okay, so let's dive just a little bit into the context of this story and unpack some of what's here, because it's important that we understand the socio-political world in which these folks were operating.

So first and foremost, these two stories, the one with Jesus and the Pharisees, and the one with Jesus and the Canaanite woman, are situated back to back in both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Mark. And you should know that the gospels are not meant to provide a play by play historical account of Jesus' life.

Though likely, many or all of these stories happened in one way or another, the way the story is told matters a great deal. So, it's likely that a bunch of stuff happened between these two encounters, but the gospel writers chose to put these two texts together for a particular reason.

In the first encounter, we find Jesus going to head to head with some group of Pharisees who have taken offense at the fact that Jesus and his disciples do not wash their hands before eating. And Jesus finishes his debate with the bold claim that it isn't what we eat that defiles us but basically, what we say.

Now, this obviously makes this group of Pharisees very upset because cleanliness and purity, as ritualized in hand washing, is a very important part of the Torah, which is the law given to them by God. And also, we know the importance of cleaning our hands, ridding them of germs, so that we might keep ourselves and our community safe. Right? We know this.

And this was certainly part of their thinking as well. The Torah, after all, is God's law given through Moses for the purpose of creating a peaceful and healthy and holy community for the people of God. And in order to do that, actual cleanliness and physical health matter a great deal.

Handwashing and other purity rituals in many cases could be used to prevent the spread of germs or disease, rituals that kept the community safe. And they could also be effective tool for excluding people. You see, if you were defiled, it meant that you were ritually unclean, dirty in some way that made it so that you could not enter the Temple, therefore you could not access God, or the marketplace, or the community. If you were ritually unclean, you were cast out, until you could become clean once again.

So we have to wonder about those who didn't have access to clean water or who were too hungry to stop and wash or who no matter what could not become "clean" again. The most famous example of this being the woman who hemorrhaged for 12 years. Her inability to stop bleeding made her ritually unclean thus perpetually cast out of the temple and the community until she encountered Jesus and was healed.

You see, laws or rules or customs can be used to build up and create a beloved, connected community, and also, these same laws can be used to tear down and isolate and subjugate members of that community. This latter use of the law is what some of the religious leaders at that time had chosen, and so Jesus confronts them about it.

What we put in our mouths does not defile us, but what we say and how we treat one another, this is what makes us unclean.

Based on this, his own definition, Jesus turns from that place to defile himself with the way he treats this Canaanite woman and the words he says to her. Reading the story from our vantage point makes his hypocrisy almost unbelievable. How could he denounce the Pharisees for using the law to exclude people and then turn around and do the exact same thing?

According to his own reasoning, Jesus says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." So you see, for Jesus, the law, however practiced, did not extend to this Canaanite woman. For him and his community, the Canaanites were enemies of Israel. They were outsiders, pagans, not to be mixed with. And furthermore, being that she was also a woman, meant that she doubly had no right addressing him in the first place.

Which is why at first, he just ignores her cries. According to his customs, she is not even worthy of his acknowledgement. And even when her cries become simply unavoidable, and his disciples insist that he do something about it, he doubles down and tells this desperate mother: "it's not fair..." (which can also be translated as

right or good, as laid out in the law) ...It is not *good* to throw the children's' food to the dogs."

Putting aside the fact that this breaks my heart every time I read it, there is a grace here for us: even Jesus let his own prejudice get in the way of discerning the will of God for him and for the world. Even Jesus had a moment of blindness that prevented him from seeing the fullness of God's picture for justice and righteousness and restoration for God's Creation. Even Jesus allowed the ways of the world, the ways isolation and subjugation and exclusion to obstruct the love God has for every single living and breathing being.

In this moment, even Jesus had something to learn. As he became the offended authority, using the law to exclude, this unnamed, marginalized woman, became his teacher.

"Even the dogs are given the crumbs that fall from the masters' table," she tells him.

And we can't know what was happening within Jesus at that moment. Was it because she believed that even his crumbs had the power to heal? Was it because she refused to back down? Was it because he just suddenly had an epiphany? We can't be sure. But one thing is clear: based on his own definition, he had defiled himself with these words. There existed within him a mighty plant called prejudice, and just as he warned the Pharisees, "every plant that God has not planted will be uprooted."

God chose this Canaanite woman, the epitome of an outcast, to be God's farmer, plucking from within God's son a plant that did not belong.

This unnamed, intentionally marginalized woman had the words and the strength and the wisdom to speak her truth, and by the grace of God, Jesus had the sense to hear her.

His reaction models for us what faithfulness to God looks like. It looks like being able to admit it when we get something wrong. It looks like being able to recognize when our laws or customs are being used to tear down rather than to build up. It looks like being able to acknowledge when our prejudice is getting in the way of God's desire for healing.

Faithfulness to God looks like being able to confess that our vision of what is possible and what God is up to is very often limited by our own prejudice.

And right now, as a church, and as a society, we are being called to reckon with our prejudice in a way that we haven't for a very long time, perhaps ever.

And it is really, really hard. It isn't always clear to us what is good or right, but one thing is certain. And that is we will get it wrong. And that's okay. Because the grace is that even when we get it so horribly wrong, God will keep showing up with invitations to grow in our understanding, to pluck up the weeds of prejudice, and to become evermore the beloved community of God. And all we have to do is be willing to accept those invitations, and acknowledge that God won't always send the great and mighty, authoritative teachers.

For as Paul says, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise...what is weak...to shame the strong...what is lowly and despised...so that no one may boast in the presence of God."<sup>1</sup>

Friends, we learn from this encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman that when it comes to God and God's vision and God's will for the world, we will always lack the imagination and the ability to fully grasp it.

For God's circle of inclusion and grace and wholeness is outside and over and below and deeper and wider than we can even imagine.

So, we will always find that we are getting something wrong, or that our vision is too narrow, or our interpretation too small. And that's okay. For there is grace in this.

It simply means that we shall assume that God's vision for us and for Creation will always be bigger than ours. No matter how good or right we think our vision might be, there will always be something bigger. Another thing to learn, another plant to be uprooted, and another invitation to widen or deepen our understanding of who God is and who God calls us to be.

Let it be so for us this day and every day. In the name of our Triune God, who creates, sustains, and redeems us all. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 1:27-9.