

“Welcoming the Outsider”

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Matthew 15:10-28

The story has been told that an unfamiliar man walked into a crowded church. It was a cold winter day, so the man was wearing a hat. But, unlike other men, *this* man kept his hat on. He went to his pew, sat down, and kept his hat on!

The ushers politely asked him several times to take off his hat. The man refused.

Others sitting near him also politely asked him to take his hat off. “You’re blocking our view,” they explained. But each time, the man refused.

The pastor was perturbed, too, and waited to speak to the man after worship. He told the man that he was very welcome to worship as a guest. He invited the man to join the church. But he explained that the congregation expected men to take their hats off during worship. “I hope you will conform to that practice in the future,” the pastor requested.

“Thank you,” the man replied. “And thank you for taking time to talk to me. It is good of you to invite me to join your congregation. However, I joined this congregation three years ago, and I’ve been coming here regularly ever since. But today is the first time anyone has ever talked to me.

“So, after being unknown for three years, by keeping my hat on I have gotten to talk to the ushers. I have gotten to talk to some of my neighbors in the pew. And, now, I have even gotten to have a conversation with you, who always appeared too busy to talk to me before.” (Story by Rev. Rick Thompson in his sermon, “*At the Boundary*”)

Ouch! How embarrassing? But the point was made. Even while we perceive ourselves as welcoming and hospitable people it can be quite difficult to extend hospitality to people who break our rules....people who look different than us and act like outsiders. Today’s gospel reading speaks to this very issue and you may be surprised with who seemed to stumble over the issue of welcoming an “outsider.”

Matthew 15:21-28

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just 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." ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. *"The Word of the Lord....Thanks be to God!"*

I don't know about you, but this is one of those passages I find difficult to read, let alone understand. At first reading it seems that Jesus is turning his back on this Canaanite mother who is simply seeking, like any mother would, help for her tormented daughter. She comes to Jesus and cries out, "***Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.***" And we read, "***But he did not answer her at all.***" Jesus ignored her plea....he kept on walking.

This is especially troubling because this story comes immediately after Jesus had taught his disciples that God was more concerned about compassion than whether or not a person washed their hands before they ate. But now Jesus appears to show little compassion to this distraught mother.

But she doesn't give up. In her persistence she continues to cry out for Jesus to heal her daughter. Her boisterous demands began to get on the disciples' nerves and they now plead with Jesus, "***Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.***" She's making a scene! She's driving us crazy! Send her away. Jesus responds, "***I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.***" *Who was Jesus trying to convince? Was Jesus trying to convince his disciples on his mission? Was Jesus trying to convince himself that there was a good reason to ignore the Canaanite woman? Was Jesus trying to convince the woman that he had a theological base for snubbing her?*

But the woman was not about to give up. She walked right up to Jesus and knelt before him and implored Jesus to help her. Again, Jesus answers with what seems to be a most ungracious response, ***“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”*** *Was Jesus really calling the woman a dog? Really?* This is not the Jesus I know! This picture of Jesus is foreign to me and doesn’t compute with the One who healed a Roman soldier’s servant (Matthew 8:1-13) or spoke on behalf of a woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11) or befriended Zacchaeus the outcast tax collector (Luke 19:1-10). *How do you make sense of Jesus’ seemingly rude treatment of the Canaanite woman?*

Some have made the point that Jesus’ humanity dictated Jesus’ less than charitable response. Note that our story began with the words, ***“Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon....”*** Jesus and his disciples left Palestine and hiked into Tyre and Sidon. That probably doesn’t mean much to us until we learn that Tyre and Sidon was the region where the hated and dreaded Canaanites lived. From Joshua’s time Israelites thought of the Canaanites like we might think of Al-Qaeda. Because there was such deep seated generational hatred and prejudice toward the Canaanites, Jews would seldom venture into the district of Tyre and Sidon. So, possibly, Jesus’ humanity prevented him to see beyond cultural norms.

It has been suggested that Jesus chose Tyre and Sidon as a location where no one would recognize him and where he could rest from the labor of ministry and prepare for his last, fateful trek to Jerusalem. So when Jesus ignored the Canaanite woman, some have suggested that he was simply trying to keep a low profile in preparation for his ultimate purpose on earth.

William Barclay has an interesting take on Jesus’ rude come back that it’s not fair to take the children’s food (think Jews) and throw it to the dogs (think Canaanites). While Barclay admits, *“To call a person a dog was a deadly and a contemptuous insult,”* he goes on to make the case that Jesus most likely soften the remark through his non-verbal communication. As he writes, *“The tone and the look with which a thing is said make all the difference. Even a thing which seems hard can be said with a disarming smile....We can be quite sure that the smile on Jesus’ face and the compassion in his eyes robbed the words of all insult and bitterness.”* (The Gospel of Matthew Vol. 2, p. 134)

While Jesus understands the boundless nature of God's mercy and compassion, could it be that he needed a jolt to further widen his missional understanding? Remember in Luke's gospel Jesus' childhood years were described by these words, Jesus "***increased in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor.***" (Luke 2:52) Could it be that Jesus, throughout his earthly ministry, continued to "*increase in wisdom*" and expand his vision of God's call on his life? Could it be that God used this pesky Canaanite woman to extend Jesus' horizon of God's acceptance and welcome to those outside the "house of Israel." *How do you make sense of Jesus' ungracious response to the woman?*

I am glad this passage doesn't leaving us hanging with Jesus calling the woman a dog but moves into one of the most humble, gracious and beautiful comebacks one will ever read. Remember she is bowing before Jesus and has addressed Jesus with the words of the faithful, "***Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David...***" Now she beautifully states, ***Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.***" It's like she is gently reminding Jesus that even pet dogs eat the left overs under the table. Children and dogs can eat at the same time. It doesn't have to be *either/or*.

Her profound response touches Jesus to the core and he replies, "***Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.***" Jesus is absolutely amazed by this outsider's faith. Her faith empowered her to overcome the ethnic, religious, cultural, social and sexual barriers that would have silenced most people. Her humility and faith moved Jesus to heal the woman's daughter and, very possibly, to deepen his understanding of God's amazing grace which is extended even to those whom religious society considers unworthy.

Who might the Canaanite woman be in your life? Who might you be tempted to right off as hopeless, worthless or just plain stupid? Young people with spiked hair and bodies covered with tattoos? Muslims, Jews, Hindus? Whiners, Complainers, Losers? Republicans, Democrats? Pentecostals, Liberals, Conservatives, Gays, Lesbians? Who do you find difficult to accept? What do you have the most difficult time working through? Is it appearance....personality.....lack of social skills....lack of cultural sophistication.....unorthodox beliefs.....weird idiosyncrasies and habits? What pushes your ejection button? We all have them!

The Canaanite woman exhibited extraordinary faith even though she was an outcast. Worship is the perfect place to invite God to point out those whom we consider to be outsiders, to soften our heart toward them and even be open to them as people of faith. And even if they aren't people of faith, how we respond to them might win them over to believing that Jesus Christ is for them.

In his book *A Memoir: The Pastor*, Eugene Peterson tells the story of Wayne and Claudia who were outsiders to the Christian faith, yet were welcomed by the people of *Christ the King Presbyterian Church* where he was pastor. Wayne and Claudia had six children, ranging in age from eight to seventeen. They visited with Eugene and told him they wanted a place where their children could “get a moral foundation built into their lives.” Peterson writes, ***“They were both up front with me about their motivation—this wasn’t about them, but about the children. Wayne let me know that he was an atheist. ‘I don’t have anything against religion; I just don’t need it. But we will be with them on Sundays.’”*** (p. 253)

After making the point that Wayne and Claudia were atheists they did, indeed, come regularly to worship every Sunday. Claudia even played the organ occasionally. Peterson describes them by saying, ***“They were not easy people to like. Wayne was a physicist who knew a lot and talked a lot about the lot that he knew. And he had answers to everything. Claudia was sharp-tongued and didn’t endear herself to anyone.”*** So here you have two difficult to like atheists worshiping every week with people trying to be Christ like toward them.

But something only the Spirit could orchestrate was happening in Wayne’s life. In the first several months of his worship when it came time to affirm the Apostle’s Creed he would only say, ***“I believe”*** and then he shut his mouth. But as time went on, Peterson noticed that incrementally Wayne would add, ***“I believe....in God the Father Almighty....then he added in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord....about ten months after confessing faith in the Father, Wayne affirmed his faith in the Holy Spirit. Shortly after that Wayne requested to be baptized. “The next week he was baptized, to the surprise of a number of those he had offended over the past year by his know-it-all atheism.”***

A couple of years after Wayne's baptism, his wife, Claudia was diagnosed with cancer. Within six weeks she was dead. Six months later Wayne's job was terminated. After several months of unemployment, the bank foreclosed on his mortgage. He and his six children were homeless.

At that point, members of the church invited Wayne to move in with them until he could get his feet on the ground. The children were welcomed into the homes of parishioners and Eugene and his wife took in several of the children. Acts of hospitality proliferated....meals were brought in, thoughtfulness expressed, encouragement given. Hospitality spread through the congregation and Peterson summarizes it this way:

“Neither Wayne nor Claudia had been easy to affirm or care for or like. The conditions that provided for a confession of faith like his and hospitality like this had been in formation inconspicuously but pervasively for ten years: Wayne’s confession, slowly formed without anyone’s noticing, Sunday after Sunday; a community’s hospitality gathering sinew and intent quietly, mostly unnoticed, and then catalyzed by Claudia’s death into a way of life that would continue to shape the character of the congregation another forty years, flourishing still.” (p, 258)

Some people are easy to dismiss....to pigeon hole like the man wearing a hat in worship.... *ill-mannered*; Canaanite woman...*heathen*; Wayne and Claudia....*unpleasant atheists*. But you never know how God might be working in *their* lives and how God might have brought them into our lives to help shape *our* character and expand our faith. Really, you never know how a Canaanite woman might bring God's grace to you.

Amen