

St. Paul's Congregational Church
 August 27, 2017, Matthew 15:21-28 – 15A
 Expand the Circle
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I have found this sentence of the most haunting and bothersome statements in the Bible: “Jesus did not answer her at all.” A woman comes out of the crowd shouting, “Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David. My daughter is tormented by a demon.” The disciples encourage Jesus to send her away – we’re used to that response from the disciples – protecting Jesus from the crowds, trying to insulate him from the demands that keep coming his way. Most of the time, though, he either ignores them or rebukes them, and goes about his preaching, healing, teaching, touching in spite of the disciples’ objections.

But this time Jesus doesn’t respond. At all.

This isn’t the Jesus we seem to know, is it. His compassion shows in feeding the 5,000, the multiple healings he does, his incredible listening skills. This response just doesn’t fit with our usual mindset of how Jesus operates.

This story is troublesome for me – maybe for you too – but maybe when we have such difficulties, it’s then that we are open to learning something new, see a new dimension of Jesus and his teachings, and move on, our faith stronger and enriched through our discomfort. We do ourselves and our faith an injustice if we gloss over these parts of the Bible that make us so uncomfortable. Even when the story turns out well – this woman’s daughter is healed – instantly – we still are to take a few moments to open ourselves, sit with our discomfort, try to determine where it’s coming from, and then allow ourselves to be touched in a new way.

Why didn’t Jesus answer her right away?

Maybe because she was a woman. And women just did not address men in public in first century Judea. And worse for her, she was a Canaanite - Canaanites were pagans, unclean in the eyes of the Jewish people. And they were ancient enemies of Israel. Society at that time was made up of just two groups: Jews and gentiles. Jews and all others.

So maybe it’s no wonder that Jesus ignored her. This woman was way out of bounds and according to Jewish tradition, ignoring her would be the correct behavior.

But these explanations don’t make sense, though, based on what we know of other encounters Jesus has, especially with women. Remember that the longest conversation he has with anyone in the Bible, including those with his closest disciples, takes place with the Samaritan women at the well. We do expect more of him than to conform to the expectations of his society – he was always so very counter cultural and expects the same from us.

This woman doesn’t quit though. Her daughter needs healing and she needs it now. We can certainly identify with the mother who will do anything for her child, can’t we. So she persists.

Jesus' response is stunning: he says, it's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. Children was a term of the time for the Jews. Dog was a term of the time for others – for Gentiles like her.

But she takes his words and throws them back at him – yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.

Jesus appears to be utterly amazed at her persistence – she is a woman arguing points of theology with a rabbi; and she's a gentile who supposedly knows nothing about theology. But she does know something about Judaism – the cry “have mercy on me” is often found in the scriptures. And in using the term, “Son of David” she recognizes Jesus as the Messiah.

In the end, Jesus responds to her request and gives her what she wants – he heals her daughter. And he even says to her, “Woman, Great is your faith.”

What just happened here? Was Jesus testing her? Was he teaching her a lesson? Maybe Jesus changed his mind – the woman convinced him to help her in spite of everything the culture of the time demanded.

Maybe what happened, though, is that Jesus learned a lesson.

Now, that statement can seem a little crazy. We've been taught that Jesus is God. We've been taught that God doesn't make mistakes. That God doesn't have to learn anything.

Well, maybe we forget that Jesus was human too. We forget the great mystery of our faith that calls Jesus fully human, fully divine. We forget the passages of the Bible that show his humanity: he got hungry. He got thirsty. He was afraid. He got tired. He got angry. He felt all the emotions that you and I feel. Oh yes, Jesus had a divinity that none of us have, but sometimes even Jesus struggled to get in touch with his divine nature. That's why he could be tempted.

It's almost as if Jesus is responding to this woman automatically – as he was expected to do – but then he suddenly stops and thinks, “Wait a minute – there's something very wrong here.”

Right here in this story is the time when Jesus expands the circle – right here in this story is the time when his mission expands to include all people – not just the Jews. “Great is your faith” he says to this woman. The gentile woman. The pagan woman. This is a remarkable, radical statement. Just a few verses before in this gospel Jesus has been marveling at the lack of faith and understanding among his closest disciples – but this woman's faith is in such contrast to the lack of faith among those in Jesus' inner circle. They don't understand. But she does.

This Canaanite woman with all her pushiness seems to understand that the grace of God present in Jesus will not be limited by existing boundaries of who is deserving and who is undeserving, who is on the inside, and who is on the outside.

Jesus was able to overcome the biases and discrimination and limits built into his own society. And that's never easy – ever - because so often we're not even aware of them - they are built in to our culture. We grow up with them – we don't know anything different. That is, until someone calls us on our beliefs. And that's what this persistent woman did for Jesus, when she said, even the dogs get the crumbs the children leave. Whatever crumbs there are to be had, this woman begs for them. She understands, better than the disciples, that Jesus is the source of help and hope and healing – and no matter

how restricted the disciples or even Jesus might believe his ministry should be – she understands that Jesus is her only hope. And she calls him out.

And she gets to Jesus. He's impressed. He stops short. This is faith! There is no more powerful affirmation of the inclusive nature of God's love nor the universal gift of God's grace than in this story.

Jesus overcomes the biases of his time – and he shows us new heights of God's love: an unconditional love. A love that is unconditional of our appearance, sin, weakness, mistakes, gender, ethnicity, gender identity, beliefs or anything else. And at the end of Matthew's gospel, we have the great commission: go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. All nations. Not just the Jews. Here's the expansion of the boundary: the unconditional universality of God's grace, of God's love for all people. All people. The widening of the circle of God's love.

If Jesus struggled so with overcoming the limits, the biases, the discriminations of his society, it's no wonder that it's a struggle for us too! And if Jesus did it, so must we.

God wants us to reach out in unconditional love to our neighbors too – no matter who they are – no matter what they look like – no matter what their abilities are – no matter what their physical, emotional, mental capabilities or limitations are. God knows that our society has limitations. God is calling us to bring Jesus' message of love and hope to a hurting and broken world, to expand our circles. And God knows, we need that message today. We need that consistent, real message of Jesus' love – not just in words but in our actions too.

Who are the Canaanites among us today? Who do we see as "other? Who do we modern Christians not welcome into our fellowship? What message do we send, knowingly or unknowingly, to the "others", the Canaanites, in our world. And are we brave enough to look into the faces of those some might consider "other." That's when real transformation happens. When the other has a face.

I think it was a Martin Luther King Day holiday when I took a group of children and youth in Middlebury to the local food bank with vans full of donated cereals. As they unloaded, they met some of the people who would receive them. I'd spent a sabbatical summer working in an inner city day camp there in Waterbury and some of the families I knew were there at the food bank that day – the Middlebury kids were surprised as we greeted each other – by name. Then when I took them to the local soup kitchen again, I was greeted by some of the guests. Finally one of the kids said to me, a little shocked, "You know these people? They all know your name! And you know theirs!"

All of a sudden the "other" had faces – the "other" had names. What these children and youth had been doing for many months collecting cereal took on a whole new meaning and intensity.

When the need has a face – when we SEE each other - our circles are expanded! And that's very good. It's walking with our neighbors that we are changed – just as Jesus was changed when he really saw and heard and faced the "other".

And let's remember that the Canaanite woman who is still shouting at us to show her mercy is among us today. Only maybe she's Latino or Muslim fighting deportation, leaving behind her children. Maybe she looks like the refugee families desperate to cross the border to escape violence – in this country and in the Mideast. Or maybe she looks

like the civilians caught in the crossfire in Africa or Charlottesville or Phoenix. Or maybe she looks like the woman shouting on the street corner as she battles the demons of mental illness. Or maybe it's the thirsty child in Flint, Michigan, who still doesn't have clean water to drink from the tap. Or maybe it's person who has withdrawn from family and friends into the depths of depression, seeing no way out except for suicide. Or the person imprisoned in opioid addiction. Or maybe she's the mother in a hungry family right here in Nutley or the homeless person we pass by on the streets.

Every one of these is a child of God: every one of these is our brother or sister in Christ.

How do we as individuals expand the circle? And how do we as church expand the circle? There's our challenge. There's our hope. We can do this! May we all open our hearts and open our Spirits to bring and live out this message of hope and love to a broken world. Let's make our circles bigger and bigger – together. Amen.