

Sermon August 20, 2023

The Canaanite Woman

Words are powerful. Joseph knew that when he chose to use them as words of blessing and forgiveness. And Jesus reminded the Pharisees of that as he pointed out the significance of what comes out of our mouths as being as life giving than as the food that goes into our mouths. He said: "it is not what goes into the mouth that pollutes you. It's not the food that will harm you," he says, "What comes out of your mouth is much more damaging." Or as one of my professors once said, "Sticks or stones may break my bones, but your words will *always* hurt me."

Words are powerful because whatever comes out of the mouth comes directly from the heart. Jewish tradition tells us that the heart is life. What we say from the heart can either be life-giving or destructive. That's what really counts.

Put hand on heart and feel it beat

Jesus travels to an area that used to be called the Land of Canaan... the same land where Jacob and his sons had lived. In his next encounter, Jesus' prophetic words about what comes out of our mouths become a reality. A stranger shows Jesus what it means to use life-giving.

A woman from Canaan approaches him. She is a foreigner, someone who would be looked down at by the Jews, simply because of where she was born and who she was. But she doesn't care what anyone thinks of her; she's a woman with a mission. She comes up to Jesus -- weeping and wailing, making so much noise that it starts to drive the disciples crazy. "Make her go away!" they say.

She is persistent, following Jesus wherever he goes. Her daughter, we are told, was tormented by a demon, and she knew only Jesus could heal her. Today we would probably say that she had mental health challenges or addiction issues that made her unable to function in society or be in relationship with her family. Her mother is desperate and will not leave Jesus alone. It's a response we can all understand... think about what you would do if it were your child in danger... you would do anything possible to get help. You'd make noise, chase down the doctors, make sure that if there was a cure available, that your child would get the best possible treatment, no matter what! When I get like that, my husband says: "look out, here comes the Mama Bear!" And that's exactly what Jesus and the disciples should have said. This woman from Canaan is in full Mama Bear mode -looking out for her cub: She shouts at Jesus to have mercy on her, over and over

again, trying to get his attention. At first Jesus ignores her. Send her away, the disciples say, but she just keeps on shouting and shouting... louder and louder and louder...

Finally Jesus stops and looks this woman in the eyes. But his response is not the one we expect. "Go Away" he basically says... "I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel." "I'm not here to help you..." His mission, he says, is limited to only a chosen few.

Maybe Jesus, I guess, was influenced by the cultural prejudices of his time.

"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it down to the dogs," he says.

It sounds so cold; especially after we just heard of his compassion to thousands of hungry people who received much more than crumbs from him. And in that moment, showed us that in Jesus there is more than enough.

But the woman never gives up. She is determined to save her beloved daughter: "Please," she begs, "Even the dogs get the crumbs on the floor."

That stops him in his tracks. It's as if he sees new possibilities that even he did not expect. This woman, a stranger, reminds him of the abundance of God's blessings, of baskets overflowing with remnants. Jesus finally sees the woman for what she is - a woman of faith. His mission expands before our eyes, walls come tumbling down, God's blessings burst forth.

"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

Jesus' mission and ministry is growing... tearing down centuries old boundaries. God's family, descended directly from Abraham expands to include all of God's people, breaking down the walls we make to separate ourselves. Through the need of this woman, Jesus responds to the marginalized, and lives out his earlier words to the Pharisees. What we say and what we do can be either life-giving or destructive. The woman's daughter was healed.

It is up to us to choose to be life-giving – to extend our welcome to all people, no matter who they are or where they come from. No matter what society tells us we should think about them.

We just read our mission, vision and values. It's up to us to live into them! Right now the church... all people of faith... need to find a way to look beyond our divisions. Look beyond skin color or immigration status or gender or sexual orientation or political persuasion or cultural identity. We need to look deeper... look deep into one another's eyes to get that

glimpse of Christ in each and every person. We need to claim what is life affirming and condemn the destructive, corrosive power of hate. We need to reach out in love... Especially towards those people we are tempted to turn away from.

In those unexpected encounters with people different from us, new opportunities and understandings arise. Abundant blessings that we may miss if we turn away.

So go out and respond in love to all of God's children. Take a risk and expand your love in new and creative ways. And if we do, perhaps we will hear Jesus say to each of us today, "Great is your faith! Great is your love. God bless you!"