

Listen and Learn...and Live!

[Text - Matthew 15:21-28]

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As a child, I was taught that *Silence is Golden*; and that, often, children should be seen and not heard. As a gay man living through the AIDS epidemic, I learned that, often, Silence Equals Death; and that suppressing the truth, because it makes people feel personally or politically uncomfortable, can be fatal. As a privileged white male in 2018, I recognize that silencing women about an abuse or injustice in their life, is often a way of protecting that privilege; while simultaneous keeping that abuse alive and festering for those who've experienced it. Unfortunately, the privilege to speak - and to be heard - is not something that's equally accessible to all. Fortunately, things are beginning to change. To paraphrase the writer of Ecclesiastes, 'the time to keep silence is over; and the time to speak has arrived!'

This morning we hear a classic case of a woman initially being ignored; then being told to go away; then, being rudely insulted; before, finally, she is heard and appropriately responded to. Now, shockingly, the man who treats this woman in this dreadful way, is none other than Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, the champion of the oppressed and the defender of the downtrodden. So naturally, we gotta' ask "What in God's name is going-on here?" The woman's request is humble and sincere. She's not even asking for herself, but is seeking healing and release for her young daughter. It's the kind of request we would expect Jesus to respond to quickly and compassionately; but instead, he ignores her, and then basically calls her a dog. Now, many Biblical scholars suggest that Jesus responds this way to "teach a lesson" to his disciples, *and* to the woman. By disregarding her request and demeaning her, he may get his disciples to stick-up for her, which isn't their go-to response. Usually, they bristle when Jesus is interrupted by

women or children, foreigners or “outsiders”. This time, they at least acknowledge the woman’s presence, if only to encourage Jesus to send her away. Jesus’ actual response, however, is far more disheartening.

Completely ignoring the woman, Jesus says to his disciples, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” [Now *that’s* rude!] On hearing this, the woman comes-up and kneels right in front of Jesus, to once again plead her case: “Lord, help me!” But he answers her, “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” [Now *that’s* just plain mean!] No wonder Biblical scholars try to clean-up this encounter - by claiming that Jesus really intends to help her, but first wants to teach his disciples a lesson in inclusivity, and teach her a lesson in persistence. Personally, I find that explanation far more disturbing than the probability that Jesus is simply responding from the ingrained cultural, racial, and patriarchal prejudices of the society in which he was raised. Taken at face value, this messy encounter can offer us a marvelous insight on how Jesus is fully human, yet ultimately embraces and embodies the Divine!

Like every person of any race or culture, Jesus grows-up hearing that people of *other* races and cultures are ethnically and ethically, morally and mentally inferior to themselves. He’s also been continually exposed to the idea that women and children, by their very nature, are lower-class citizens. These kind of socially ingrained prejudices are an unfortunate part of every human society - including Jesus’ and our own. Fortunately though, as Jesus demonstrates, we don’t have to hold-on to those learned biases. Once we recognize them, we can immediately and unequivocally renounce them. And we can take-hold of the Divine Truth: that *all people* are of equal - and eternal - value, including ourselves!

In this morning's reading, you and I are presented with two exceptional models of faithful and courageous living. First there's the Canaanite woman, who demonstrates that true faithfulness includes a willingness to challenge others, and to speak the truth to those in power; to confront racism, sexism, bigotry, and bad behavior whenever and wherever it arises! By taking a knee in front of Jesus, this Canaanite woman bravely demonstrates that she believes he is capable of more than even he himself thinks he is in that particular moment. And her unshakable trust in the *abundance* of Divine Compassion and Grace, inspires Jesus to step-up his game and to declare, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

With this response, Jesus shows us that true faithfulness include a willingness to listen and learn; to grow and evolve; to be challenged and changed. Jesus is secure enough in his own self and in his own relationship with the Holy One, that he can change direction when he sees a better way to go. He shows us that a genuine and mature *faith* includes the ability to expand the way we think, and to improve the way we interact with others.

As people raised with our own cultural, racial, and gender biases, you and I can be greatly encouraged by these two wonderful examples of faith. We, too, can acknowledge our mistakes and wrongdoings; *learn* from them; and take the appropriate corrective action. A static, crystalized Christ can't help us with this; but a growing, adaptable Jesus can help us learn how to face our own prejudices, make amends for our wrongs, change our ways, and move forward as compassionate and caring children of our One Divine Source.

Ultimately, the Canaanite woman's mission to help her daughter, ends up helping Jesus remember his true mission - of embracing and loving *all* people in the Name and Power of the Holy One. Likewise, her courageous example can inspire and energize you

and me, as we seek to carry forward our congregation's Stated Mission of "Loving, Serving and Accepting *All* People with God's Life-Changing Power". In today's political and social climate, it is crucial that you and I increase our commitment and our efforts to extend Divine Love and Grace to *all* people - regardless of race, religion, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, or social standing. We must we speak-up and act-out on behalf of *all* those who are put-down and pushed-aside by society or religion.

We must faithfully and joyfully proclaim the tremendous depth of Christ's love for us all - a love that is willing to listen and learn, grow and evolve, deepen and expand - making sure that there is ample room at the Table for *everyone!*