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A Heart of Faith

Psalm 133 & Mark 15:10-28

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 17, 2014 by Christy Lohr Sapp

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When I lived in New York City, I coordinated an interfaith program where we took people to visit various places of worship. Through this I got to know a number of temples, mosques and gurudwaras in the greater New York area. One of my favorites was B'nai Jeshurun – a Jewish congregation on Manhattan's Upper West Side. I loved BJ because it had moving, lively music, young, energetic rabbis, a community driven by social justice concerns, and because it was a living example of interfaith hospitality.

Years before my visits began the community suffered a shock. One night the roof of the seventy-five year old building collapsed bringing half a ton of plaster onto the bimah where the Torah is read during worship. The sanctuary was empty at the time, and no one was hurt. The building was immediately closed for repair, and the ceiling restoration project took years to complete. (Perhaps this sounds a little too familiar to us, but stick with me – this story has a happy ending.)

There is a large Methodist church around the corner from BJ, and immediately the congregation of St. Paul & St. Andrew welcomed their neighbors with open arms. They made their sanctuary available for Shabbat services – after all, the church was under-utilized on Friday nights and Saturday mornings.

BJ thrived during the years of the restoration, membership increased, the Hebrew school grew, and Saturday morning worship at St. Paul & St. Andrew became the norm. The Jewish congregation had outgrown its sanctuary, and once the restoration work was complete, they returned mainly for Friday nights and smaller services.

In order to accommodate the comfortable use of the Methodist sanctuary and to make it a more interfaith-friendly space, the leaders of the congregations had a large banner made that hangs over the altar. On it is printed the first verse of the Psalm from this morning: “How good it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in harmony.”

The relationship between these faith communities is a living example of how pleasing it is when kindred live together in peace. And, what a welcome example it can be for us today in the midst of current global realities that are marked by violence, distrust, war and conflict.

In its own way, our gospel lesson this morning is also a story of people seeking peace. It represents Jesus' proclivity for boundary-crossing and peace-building even if reluctantly. We enter into the gospel reading today while Jesus is doing his typical thing – challenging the status quo and teaching a new way of being in the world. In the verses that preceded today's reading, Jesus calls the religious leaders around him hypocrites and commandment-breakers. He flings their scripture back at them saying, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” (Mt 15: 8-9) Jesus is turning his ire on the religious establishment, and this is making his disciples a little uncomfortable. They don't understand what he is trying to say to them or to the Pharisees, and just as he is explaining the internal versus external aspects of defilement, they get a living demonstration of this lesson and are visibly confronted with their own shortcomings and prejudices.

Let's take a look at the text:

*Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.”<sup>16</sup> Then (Jesus) said, “Are you also still without understanding?<sup>17</sup> Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?<sup>18</sup> But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.”<sup>21</sup> Jesus (then) left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.”*

Enter the Canaanite woman stage left. She is aggressive and insistent. She is demanding and persistent. She is desperate. The Canaanite woman is a foreigner. For the gospel writers, the term “Canaanite” is outdated

and meant to belittle and diminish. She is untrusted and unclean. She is walking defilement and is purely 'other'. For Jesus this move to engagement with the Canaanite woman, while geographical, also represents something ideological. In this encounter Jesus is standing at the intersection of two races or tribes. He is crossing boundaries physically and socially.

The woman starts by acknowledging Jesus as Lord and asking for his mercy. This is remarkable in and of itself. Here she is a heathen, a pagan, a person from a despised and denigrated land – someone who does not even merit a name in the story - and she is about to teach Jesus and his followers a thing or two about faith.

Jesus' response to her unsettles us. He ignores her. Like the busy shopper walking down Ninth Street, Jesus pretends not to hear her plea for help. The disciples cannot help but acknowledge her, though, because she is making a ruckus. They urge him to send her away – to shoo her off like a bothersome dog, like the unwelcome intrusion that she is. When Jesus does acknowledge her, he does not do so gently. Here we see him in all his humanness. He responds in a mean and racist way – comparing her to a dog and dismissing her entirely.

Now, dogs are dirty. Even cute little puppies, as the text is often interpreted to mean, are considered unclean in Middle Eastern cultures. Jesus is putting this woman in her place by referring to her as a dog. She retorts, but the damage is done. The words are said. Jesus is rude, and Jesus is discriminatory.

Some Biblical scholars suggest that in his response to the Canaanite woman Jesus was wrestling with his own reactionary urges – that he was struggling with the cultural baggage he inherited. In this he was moving from a Jewish exclusiveness to a more universal understanding of the other.<sup>1</sup> In this interpretation, Jesus was a product of his time and his culture, and his initial gut-reaction grew from a specific context. It was not a divinely-inspired reaction of brotherly love, but rather a fully human reaction of dismissal and disdain.

We, too, are human, so we know how this goes, don't we? How many times have subtle prejudices emerged in our own lives? Whom have we dismissed because they do not look like us or come from our side of town? Whom do we turn away at the border? Who do we think defiles our families, our homes, our country with their presence? The Broadway musical "Avenue Q" features a song that gets to the point. It is entitled "Everyone's a Little Bit Racist". The lyrics go:

If we all could just admit  
That we are racist a little bit  
Even though we all know that it's wrong  
Maybe it would help us get along ...  
If we all could just admit that we are racist a little bit  
And everyone stopped being so P.C.  
Maybe we could live in harmony

I don't think that this is the kind of harmony that the Psalmist intended when calling for kindred to live together. But, maybe we all would get along a little bit better if we recognized those places where we have some prejudice – those places where we are not perfect. Maybe this is what Jesus is internally wrestling with when he ignores the Canaanite woman.

The problem with ignoring our own shortcomings, though, is the same problem that Jesus encounters in this text: persistence. We can push them aside, but they keep coming back. While Jesus demonstrates his utterly human side in this exchange, the Canaanite woman also demonstrates her utterly convicted side in her response. He says, "I wasn't sent for you; you are a dog." And she responds, "But even the family puppy gets the left-overs." In this she proves that she knows the power of the gospel. In this she shows that she gets it, she gets Jesus and she gets his power and authority. She understands that he ushers in a new way – a way not

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Hoessler, I Knew You Would Come!, C.S.S. Publishing, Lima, pg 60.

bound by racism or division, a way not limited to cultural baggage or isolationism, a way marked by peace. In her response she is saying, “True, I am not one of you, but I believe that by my association with you I am worthy of salvation. I am worthy of a blessing. I deserve the peace that you can give.” In her response, she is calling Jesus to be more than his human nature; she is challenging him to be divine – to move beyond petty earthly conceptions of defilement and difference to see the worth of those who are rejected and despised, even those who are deemed unclean.

This is huge. This is faith. And, with her words, the scales fall off Jesus’ eyes and he sees her for who she is as a child of God. He sees into her heart and sees there a heart of faith.

Remember that the Canaanite woman approaches Jesus not for her own benefit but for the sake of her daughter – a daughter who is ill, tormented, and beyond relief. She risks much in seeking him out. She risks her reputation, her pride, and her own tradition for the sake of another. In her encounter with Jesus this woman demonstrates the parable that the disciples have a hard time understanding just a few verses before. Jesus says to them, “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart.”

What proceeds from the mouth of the Canaanite woman is a restless heart that can only find peace through faith. This heart is not threatened by difference. It is not afraid to cross boundaries. It is not afraid to risk itself for the sake of others. It breaks taboos and societal norms – Jew versus Gentile, male versus female – all for the sake of another. This is the kind of radical boundary-crossing that Christ calls us to. This is the kind of disciple Christ calls us to be.

The past week has had much of bad news. There is war in the Middle East. There is rioting in Missouri. There is persecution of Christians in Iraq. If anything, we see a world that is not living by the 133<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in harmony – except when they don’t. Then it is wretched and dispiriting. Each rocket attack, each drone strike, each innocent death, and each tear-gassing reminds us that, around the world, brothers and sisters do not live in peace.

Yet there was one piece of news that gave me of hope. In the midst of an Ebola outbreak in West Africa, there are brothers and sisters living together in unity. Dr. Kent Brantly is a doctor who was working in Liberia with Samaritan’s Purse, a US-based Christian humanitarian agency. In the course of comforting patients with the Ebola virus, he, too, contracted the disease. Dr. Brantly recounts that as he cared for Liberians, he “held the hands of countless individuals.”<sup>2</sup> Imagine how this must have felt to those who were dying. Ebola is a nasty, violent virus. It kills indiscriminately, and it reduces victims to nothingness. It is akin to modern-day leprosy. Yet, this man reached out to the dying with a human touch, with a hand of peace. Rather than pulling away, he held the hands of those who were deemed untouchable. He saw past the defilement to the child of God beneath. He risked himself for the sake of others. This is a heart of faith. This is a heart that saves.

We see something similar in the Canaanite woman. She risks everything she has and everything she is on the chance of salvation through Jesus. She does this not for herself but for another. While she is rejected and despised, her faith persists.

Her faith is particularly impressive when compared with the disciples – with Jesus’ own followers. In last week’s gospel lesson we heard the story of Peter walking on water. Jesus comes to him across the sea, and as he gets out of the boat to meet his lord, Peter becomes frightened and begins to sink. Jesus grabs his hand and says, “O man of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Mt 14:31) Here we have one of Jesus’ disciples – the rock on whom he will build his church – who doubts the saving power of Christ. Yet, this week we hear of a woman whom Jesus has never met, whom he reacts to with negativity and dismissal – to whom he ultimately

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.breitbart.com/Big-Peace/2014/08/08/Christian-Doctor-Writes-of-Holding-Ebola-Victims-Hands-God-Calls-Us-to-Serve>

responds, “Woman, great is your faith.” In the midst of rejection, she has a heart of faith. Perhaps you can empathize with her because you, too, feel completely ‘other’ from Jesus.

Perhaps you, like this woman, are so weighed down by grief and despair that you feel you have no options. Perhaps you have tried everything and your only hope now rests in this miracle man from Galilee. Perhaps you are reduced to nothing and feel yourself to be no better than a dog who begs. Perhaps you are just tired: tired of fighting the demons, tired of being rejected, and tired of feeling unworthy. Perhaps you have hit the bottom and can sink no lower. And, perhaps this is the time in which the Holy Spirit will enter your heart and fill it with faith. A faith that makes no sense. A faith that risks everything. A faith that grows from despair and flourishes in unworthiness.

This faith leads the Canaanite woman to break customs. This faith leads her to reject the status quo. This faith leads her to cross boundaries. And, this faith leads us all to salvation. In this faith, we find the promise of the Psalmist: the Lord’s blessing which is life forevermore. Amen.