

Nevertheless, She Persisted

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August 16, 2020. In today's gospel we see a glimpse of Jesus' humanity. He claims that all are beloved, and yet he refuses to help the Canaanite woman and calls her a dog. Nevertheless, she persisted. And she shows us something of what it means to be a protestor, of the highest order.

Readings: [Isaiah 56:1, 6-8](#), [Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32](#), [Matthew 15:10-20, 21-28](#)

*** Transcript ***

Is anyone else feeling kind of tired this week? Like you're spinning your wheels and you're not getting anywhere? As if no matter what you say or do, it's falling on deaf ears? I am so tired of looking at other people's eyes over their masks, or seeing them in little squares on our Zoom screens. Weary of wondering how to spend free time, holidays, with options so limited, always calculating the risk. Parents, teachers, and students are wading through pages of plans and protocols and weighing all the choices for the upcoming school year — none of them ideal, all of them hard. And we all want more than anything to be fully in community, safely. There are many who are living in loneliness, and grief, and isolation these days. Perhaps highlighted a bit as we edge back to "normal" but we can't quite get there. I don't know about you, but sometimes it feels like one more Zoom meeting, and I'm going to go soak my laptop in the water pooling on the Mead Center roof! But maybe I should just sit that Zoom meeting out instead. We're all a little weary in different ways, experiencing stress and grief, and to be honest, some trauma. Our brains are understandably a bit sloggier than normal, and our capacity perhaps lower than we feel it should be.

And then today, we have *this* gospel. The one where Jesus, *Jesus*, calls the Canaanite woman, who is just trying to save her daughter, a *dog*. Maybe we should just sit this reading out? Or maybe, if we take a moment to breathe, there is something to be learned from the story, as there always seems to be in the end.

For one thing, if you are feeling worn out today, we can hear in this story that we are not alone. The Canaanite woman comes to the square, crying out for help, and nobody listens to her. And although she doesn't say how long her daughter has been possessed, we do know that this isn't the first time she has made her plea. The disciples say she keeps yelling, and they ask Jesus to send her away or make her stop. When Jesus says her problem is not his responsibility, *she* is not his responsibility — in spite of the fact that she as a Canaanite is of the house of David just like Jesus is — the woman comes right up to him and names their common ancestry saying, "Son of David, help me." And this is when Jesus, the Son of God, equates her to a dog. Maybe *he* should sit this one out!

Just because our brains at their best learn really well through repetition, if we take a look at how Jesus taught and the stories he told, we will see that this is not the first time Jesus has addressed the place and beloved-ness of someone seen as an outcast, someone like the Canaanite woman. Jesus likes to give us the same message again and again, to make sure we can get it, and that's especially helpful with our brains a little bit foggy. And most of the time, the lesson is: all are beloved. This message starts for us today with our Isaiah text: "Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered." No limits to God's embrace all through the Older Testament. And Jesus' ministry carries that through.

Think about the Prodigal Son. He too is unheard, outcast, and he calls himself a servant not worthy of

sonship. And his older brother would certainly have agreed. But their father claims him as a child. God claims them both as beloved. The Good Samaritan was rejected by those around him simply because he's a Samaritan. But as the parable unfolds, we come to see that this person we least expect — the Samaritan, of all people — is the one Jesus chooses to lift up as good, the one we will come face-to-face with when we are laying in the ditch. And then there is the woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery, lepers, Zacchaeus and other tax collectors, and on and on. There are countless examples of God welcoming the outsider, Jesus lifting up the outcast.

And still, today, Jesus takes away this woman's humanity by the language he uses — explicitly excludes her from the message he himself has given us over and over, that all are included as God's children. I think we all have those days, don't we? When as hard as we try, we in our humanity fall short of our ideals. We speak about patience, and turn around and snap at those closest to us. We do our best to embody grace, and then growl through our mask at the cashier checking us out at the grocery store, or snarl over the phone at the person trying to solve our internet issues. We preach forgiveness, and then we realize, it means the neighbor whose dog won't stop digging up our lawn, too.

We claim, as Jesus did so many times, that all are welcome, all are beloved, and then we become aware that although we find it easy to welcome people with disabilities, our community, workplace, or school is not actually welcoming for LGBTQIA people. Or we hear the voices of our black siblings, and come to realize that, in so many places where we take our comfort and belonging for granted, they do not feel valued, heard, or even safe. We all have those days — and we all have those barriers within us.

Matthew shows us a Jesus who is fully human, as well as divine. And in today's gospel we see a glimpse of Jesus' humanity. And we learn from what we see Jesus doing in this story how we are called to respond when we are caught in our blind spots, when we hit a wall. We don't know why or how it happened. Maybe Jesus was tired, and caught off-guard by the woman's plea and the disciples' reaction. Maybe Jesus wanted to demonstrate in full ugliness what we shouldn't do, almost like a living parable. However it happened, in that moment the Canaanite woman doesn't challenge his words, but says that even dogs deserve to be fed. She reflects Jesus' words back to him, highlighting just how awful his comment was. Called out, Jesus doesn't make excuses, or explain why he was right or what he really meant. He hears her, perhaps for the first time. And then, Jesus heals her daughter.

In the end, this story is about Jesus. But it is also very much about the Canaanite woman. The one with the ill daughter. The one seen as an outsider. The one called a pest, and then a dog. The one who had cried out, over and over. The one who had been unheard, and explicitly excluded. And yet, she didn't give up. They tried to push her away and silence her. Nevertheless, she persisted.

The Canaanite woman, family of faith, is in truth a protestor, of the highest order. One of the more famous writings of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is his letter from the Birmingham Jail, which he wrote while imprisoned for his own persistence as a protestor. In it he says, "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." The Canaanite woman seems to have known this. She knew Jesus could heal her daughter, knew she was worthy of healing. And like Dr. King, Annie Lee Cooper, John Lewis, Rosa Parks, and other leaders of the Civil Rights movement, she didn't allow attempts to silence her to stop her as she sought what she so desperately needed.

In all of our history, people claiming their right to justice and dignity and their place among God's children have done as the Canaanite woman did. Slavery ended, women achieved the right to vote, LGBTQIA people claimed their right to exist, and so many other injustices have been righted because

of people whose voices have rung out persistently over the years, including today, as black people demand that the long history of systemic racism and brutality against them end.

Even in our church, people who have been shuffled to the side or out the door have claimed their place in the pews and the pulpits, living out the courage and desperation of the Canaanite woman in their own times and places. Because of their persistence, this year we celebrate the anniversaries — 50 years since women could be ordained, 40 years since the first black woman was ordained, and 10 years since the Churchwide Assembly voted to allow ordination for LGBTQIA clergy. All of this took not days, weeks, or months, but years of sacrifice and courage and persistence, people following the lead of the Canaanite woman insisting she be heard.

So we of the soggy brains and weary souls and short tempers can take heart today. The Canaanite woman was tired too, but her persistence succeeded. And even Jesus hit those walls and barriers and tripped up sometimes, as he embodied the vision that God's love and mercy are for everyone. But that vision rekindled. The promise of God to Isaiah, and Jesus' challenge and invitation to live out God's justice, persist, just when we think we are ready to sit this one out. Paul assured us God's mercy is wide when we fall, and the Canaanite woman is leading the way.

Thanks be to God.

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