

Insist on Being Included

Matthew 15:21-28
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Has this ever happened to you: you are being introduced to someone at a social event and reach out to shake hands, but even before you release your grip the other person has looked away, as if to see if there is someone else more interesting to meet? Being all but dismissed by another person can leave us feeling somewhere between unimportant or unnecessary to blatantly excluded. You just try to let the put-down slide right off and move along, recognizing that it's more about the other person than it is about you. But that's not always easy to do.

Given the aversion to this kind of impersonal treatment, we are most likely disturbed by the story in today's gospel reading from Matthew 15. Let's face it, Matthew's story of Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman is one that's hard for many of us to hear, because it seems to present Jesus as responding in an uncompassionate way to the cry for help from this Gentile woman. This is not the Jesus we remember from Sunday School.

We read that Jesus' initial response is simply to ignore the woman who is desperately seeking help for her child. When she persists, we are given the impression that he reacts unwillingly and only under compulsion. **Jesus' words strike us as unduly harsh and insensitive. "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs"** (v. 26).

The context of this saying certainly suggests that the people whom Jesus is called to minister to, the "lost sheep of Israel" (the Jews), are "children," and that the Gentiles, represented by this bold woman, are, by contrast, "dogs." **Such a statement implies that non-Jews are even subhuman and undeserving of God's concern. But is that really the message Matthew was trying to get across?**

Several biblical commentators make various attempts to relieve this story of its obvious embarrassment. Jesus was just testing her faith before he helped her, say some; Jesus was struggling in his own mind with the idea of a mission to non-Jews, say others; Jesus was bringing her to an appropriate humility, say yet others. But all of these together do not smooth out the surprisingly harsh tones of this encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. And as a preacher, I too realize that this is one of those stories that must be handled with care. We must be careful not to read more into the story than is there.

So first of all, let us remember that Matthew wrote his gospel account of Jesus' life some 40 years or so after Jesus' death. And like all the other gospel accounts, it is important to know the original audience to which the book was written, and the situation that the church found itself in at that time. Biblical scholars believe that Matthew was writing to *Jewish Christians* (as contrasted with the Gospel of Mark, which is believed to have been written for Gentile Christians). Matthew, therefore, wrote with a distinctly Jewish point of view. Also, biblical scholars agree that there is every reason

to believe that some of the stories about Jesus were edited to conform to the convictions of the author.

We also know that the first great controversy of the early church was whether or not to admit Gentiles who did not first become Jewish by converting to Judaism. **Even the Apostle Paul, who was the great missionary to the Gentile world, held the position: to the Jew first, and then to the Gentile.**

The Gentile woman, then, can represent the vast numbers of non-Jews who were to become members of the Christian church. It's also interesting to note that this story describes one of the very few occasions in which Jesus ministered outside the territory of ancient Palestine. Tyre and Sidon were cities located north of Israel on the coastline of the Mediterranean Sea. They still exist today in modern Lebanon. So at another level this is a remarkable story because it foreshadows the going out of the gospel to the whole world. Biblical commentator William Barclay even states: **"It shows us the beginning of the end of all the barriers."**

We are still plagued today, however, with this painful issue of who to admit and accept into the church. Churches often make it very clear that membership in their particular congregation must follow sometimes strict, yet often unwritten rules. Not many churches would admit this, however. But isn't it true that when you visit a church for the first time you can just tell whether or not you would be fully welcomed?

A sense of being unwelcome can be based on any number of issues, including race, economic condition, sexual orientation, theological or political perspective, and sometimes even on marital status, gender or age. That's why **here at College Hill our Mission Statement clearly declares that our goal is to "build an inclusive community of faith."** That word 'inclusive,' has become a not-too-veiled code word for **accepting people that are often excluded by other church institutions.**

The decision, for example, to boldly extend our ministry efforts to the Hispanic community, just over 4 years ago, is evidence of this congregation's commitment to inclusiveness and acceptance, just as was reaching out to the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender community just over 10 years ago – something we will recognize next Sunday in a More Light Celebration service of worship.

Let's go back, then, and take a closer look at this Canaanite woman, for she has a lot to teach us – especially about insisting on being included. She was clever, persistent, and exhibited great faith that Jesus could heal her child. For some, the Canaanite woman can be described as a "valiant woman," who would have been typically invisible in a male-centered, patriarchal society. She is obviously a woman of courage and long-suffering, and not willing to take "no" for an answer – a mark of a true progressive. And as a loving parent, she will not give up until she finds the necessary help for her daughter. How many of you, as parents, wouldn't go to any length to help a suffering son or daughter? Circumstances like this often bring out the courage and boldness in even the most shy and reserved people.

New Testament scholar, Sharon Ringe points out in the book, *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, that **the woman did not accept the low esteem in which the society held both her daughter and herself. The liberating activity of Jesus with women, in many gospel stories, illustrates the fully inclusive nature of the kingdom, or realm, of God.**

This story, then, serves to challenge the sexism and racism of the readers, ancient and modern, who tend to consider those of different gender, ethnicity, or

whatever, as "the other." The gospels ultimately teach us that no one is inherently more distant from God than any other person or group of persons.

This story invites us, therefore, to place ourselves in the role of the Canaanite woman – the role of "the other" – to **measure how we reach out in courage, persistence and confidence in our insistence on being heard and included.** On the other hand, this story also invites us to **struggle with our own perceptions, like the disciples, of who we consider to be "the others."**

In the Bible, we are given the impression that Jews looked down upon and excluded all who were non-Jews. When I read the newspaper here in Tulsa, especially the Letters to the Editor, I am given the impression that unless you are of European decent, middle- to upper-class, self-sufficient, and more often than not, a right-wing evangelical conservative (both theologically and politically), and of course, straight, then you are "the other." I especially get this impression when reading about issues of immigration, particularly in relation to Hispanics and Muslims.

Yet, when we are at our most honest with ourselves, **are there not types of individuals or groups of people that you and I consider as "the other?"** In this day and age of rampant and destructive partisanship, it's hard *not* to consider those with widely different political perspectives and worldviews as "the other." Can we not also extend that sense of "otherness" to include those with whom we vehemently disagree on theological perspectives and worldviews, especially along the lines of issues dealing with what we call social justice?

More often than not, we too fall into the temptation of not recognizing the prejudice that dwells within ourselves, while easily identifying it in others – there's that word again, 'others.'

The un-named pagan woman in this biblical story was undoubtedly an outsider on many levels. This story informs us, however, that **the good news of God's mercy, generosity and acceptance crosses all barriers and boundaries, and is therefore extended to those we would label "outsiders" as well.**

Members of despised or oppressed groups (and that may indeed include you or I from time to time) must be bold, like the Canaanite woman, in their (and our) insistence on being included.

The Canaanite woman is not content to be ignored – and neither should we - because she is convinced that her daughter deserves a chance at living a full, productive life - as do we. This story, then, begs the following question that I will leave you to ponder this week:

- **Do you and I, do we, have the patience, perseverance, courage, faith, and even the cleverness to insist on those things that lead to a life of the well-being and full inclusion?**

I'd like to think we do.

Amen.