

Make the Circle Wider

The incident reported in today's reading from Matthew's gospel takes place in the region of Tyre and Sidon, two Gentile cities north of Galilee. Matthew doesn't tell us why Jesus went there. As this passage makes clear, at this point Jesus didn't see himself as having a mission to the Gentiles. But this incident comes at a point when Jesus has already tried, more than once, to get away from the crowds that followed him. Mark's account of the same event may give us a hint as to what Jesus was doing in Gentile territory, when he tells us, *He entered a house and didn't want anyone to know he was there*. Even Jesus sometimes needed to take some time off! But it was not to be. A local Canaanite woman hears that he is in the area, comes to find him, and starts shouting at him to help her.

Now, to understand the significance of this, we have to understand who the Canaanites were and what the Jews thought of them. The Canaanites were the indigenous people of Palestine, the people who were already there when the Israelites ended their forty years of wandering in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt. It was the Canaanites that the People of Israel conquered, taking their land and turning them into an oppressed and restless underclass, just as European settlers later did to the native peoples of the Americas.

Israel loathed the Canaanites and their religion— a fertility religion that centered on the storm god, Baal— and regarded their way of life as abominable. Perhaps a good analogy would be to say that the attitude of the Jews toward the Canaanites was similar to the attitude of those European settlers, in this country, who thought that the only good Indian was a dead Indian, an attitude that led to genocide and wide scale displacement of our native population. Jews referred to the Canaanites as “dogs,” a terrible insult in a culture that viewed dogs, because they ate refuse, with utter disgust. Applied to a person, the term “dog” was meant to hurt and humiliate.

So let's return to this gutsy Canaanite woman, whose concern for her daughter is so great that she has decided to risk the reception she might get and approach Jesus. I imagine that when she appeared, the comments among Jesus' followers might have gone something like this: “Isn't that woman a Canaanite? What's she doing here?” “Get away from me, you dirty Canaanite!” “Canaanite dog. Woof, woof. Canaanite dog!” “Why don't you stay with your own kind? The master doesn't want to have anything to do with the likes of you.” If you've ever been taunted, you know how she's feeling, but she doesn't turn back. She cries out, *“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”*

Matthew tells us that Jesus does not answer her at all. He completely ignores her! Is this the Jesus we're familiar with? The one with an ear always tuned to those who cry for help? But the Canaanite woman is not willing to be brushed aside: *“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon!”*

At this point, the disciples have had enough. “*Send her away,*” they urge Jesus, “*for she keeps shouting at us.*” Finally Jesus looks at her. “*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,*” he tells her. The disciples nod and smile at one another. Good answer! But the Canaanite woman continues to come forward, pushing her way past the disciples who draw back so that they won't be defiled by her touch. She reaches Jesus and kneels before him, saying, “*Lord, help me.*”

In response to this woman, this desperate woman who has broken taboos of race and gender to try to get help for her child, Jesus says a shocking thing: “*It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*” He might as well have spat in her face. But even so, she does not give up. Instead, she calls him to *be* who she believes him to be—*Lord, Son of David*, the chosen one of God. “*Yes, Lord,*” she responds, “*yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.*” I imagine that Jesus is visibly taken aback. After a few moments of silence, he responds, “*Woman, great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish.*”

This is an interesting story, one that has caused preachers and commentators a great deal of trouble. As Northeast Kingdom author and Episcopal Priest, Garrett Keizer comments, *It is certainly not one of the sweeter stories about Jesus. I used to cringe whenever it came up in the lectionary.* Jesus, who is shown over and over again, as having compassion on those who come to him for healing, is anything *but* compassionate in this story. He comes across as hard-hearted and exclusionary, unwilling to extend himself to anyone outside the small circle of his own people.

It raises an interesting question as to why the early church would preserve a story like this. Wouldn't you think they'd want to let it quietly disappear? The most likely reason it was preserved is that this story shows Jesus expanding the definition of his ministry beyond the narrow circle of “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” As the early church grew, it was increasingly composed of Gentiles. It would have been important to assert that Jesus meant to include them, too. But there is something else going on in this story.

We must remember that the historical Jesus was a first-century Jewish man who had been socialized into the attitudes of his culture and time. Like his disciples, he at first didn't really see the Canaanite woman as worthy of his time and attention. Her persistence and her belief in *him*, challenged him to go beyond his culture, to respond as God and not as a man, to really *see* her as meriting his attention and respect. In a sense, she went eyeball to eyeball with Jesus, and Jesus blinked. She asked the question, “Who is included?” and forced him to expand his definition.

And why did he expand his definition? Why did he not continue to insist on the exclusiveness of his mission to the lost sheep of Israel? Over the centuries, between the time of the Exodus and the time of Jesus, we see a gradual evolution in the Jews' understanding of God. At first Yahweh was their own special God, more powerful than the Gods of the Egyptians, whose land they escaped, or the Canaanites, whose land they conquered— a tribal God who chose *them* in preference to their enemies.

Even though they were beginning to understand that there was only one God, or that God is oneness, their relationship with God was unique and exclusive. But this belief created a problem. If this one God had made *all* creation, and loved all creation as God's own, and if this God was a God of justice as well as steadfast love, then there had to be some provision for bringing *all* people into the circle of *God's* people. It's pretty hard to claim that there is only one God, and then say that this God only cares about one small group of all the people God has made.

Thus, by the time of Isaiah, several centuries after the Exodus, the prophet tells us that, at some future time, God will gather all peoples into the house of Israel *for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.* When the Canaanite woman challenged Jesus, she reminded him that God's love and healing are for all people. She showed him that faith in God, and in God's ability to change things for the better, was not limited to those who claimed they had a special, and privileged, relationship with God. She provoked him to expand his definition of who is included.

So what are we to do with this story? How does it speak to us today, especially in the light of the terrible events in Charlottesville, last weekend? The attitude of the Jews towards the Canaanites was racist and ethnocentric, just as the attitude of white supremacists is deeply racist and ethnocentric. The Canaanite woman challenged Jesus to become aware of his exclusionary attitude, to remember who he was, and to be transformed by his encounter with her. The events in Charlottesville challenge us to become aware of *our* exclusionary attitudes, to remember who we are—Christ's body in the world—and to be transformed by our encounter with the frightening reality of white supremacist hatred into witnesses to God's love for *all* God's people. With this in mind, I would like to share with you a pastoral letter from the Officers and the Council of Conference Ministers of the United Church of Christ.

Dear Members, Friends, Clergy, and Leaders of and within the United Church of Christ,

Last weekend, a group of white supremacists came to Charlottesville, Virginia, and incited violence to protest the removal of a Confederate monument. Although protest is the bedrock of our nation's democracy, coming in riot gear proves that they intended to do more than simply protest.

We, the Council of Conference Ministers and Officers of the United Church of Christ, strongly condemn the acts of violent hatred expressed by these white supremacists, Neo-Nazis, and Ku Klux Klan members. Their white robes and burning crosses were replaced with polo shirts, khakis, and tiki torches, while their lynching was replaced with a speeding car barreling through a group of peaceful protesters with the intention of harming and killing others, which it did. Their vitriolic hatred is the same.

We confess that the events of Charlottesville are systemic and communal expressions of white privilege and racism that continues to pervade our nation's spiritual ethos. And if we only condemn the acts of August 12, 2017, without condemning the roots of racism, which perpetuate discrimination in our American schools, justice system, business, and healthcare systems, then we have sinned as well. We must work toward the Kin-dom of Heaven here on earth now for the sake of a just world for all.

We do this by committing to follow the ways of Jesus, who stood with the oppressed, spoke out against political and religious powers, and courageously embodied a just world for all as he sought to create it. Today, we must follow the ways of Jesus in addressing the hatred of white supremacists and racists among us.

Our local UCC churches must be true solidarity partners with those who march in the streets. Our UCC churches are encouraged to move from the sanctuary and walk alongside other clergy and community leaders who seek to resist, agitate, inform, and comfort. We must resist hatred and violence. We must also agitate ourselves, and our neighbors to acknowledge any racism within or among us. We must inform ourselves, and our neighbors what our sacred stories reveal to us of a just world for all. We must lament and grieve with those who are injured or murdered during violent confrontations with those who mean us harm. And we must comfort those who have been discriminated against with the transformative love of God.

As we go forward, let us model the legacy of activism through our sacred call given to us by our UCC ancestors: May we be prophetic truth-tellers like our Congregational Christian forebears, who marched in public squares demanding equality for all. May we serve others, and remain faithful witnesses like our Evangelical and Reformed forebears, who tended to the needs of the forgotten. And may we be courageous like our non-UCC forebears, who left their spiritual home and joined the UCC in order to fully live out who God created them to be.

In the days to come, may God's truth, mission, and courage be our guide to embodying the Kin-dom of Heaven here on earth.