

Proper 15A, Matthew 15.10-28

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I don't know how your mind works, but maybe I'm not be the only person in this room with several short reels of film stacked in a corner of his head that contain some of the most unfortunate things he's ever said. The surly guy who runs the projector in there likes to spool one up when I'm feeling a little anxious or insecure. Maybe he means well. Maybe he's intending to say, "Yes, what just happened was an embarrassing catastrophe. And it does confirm, at least to the person you were talking to, that you really are the worst human being presently alive. But it could be worse. Remember when you said this?" And then he runs one.

Whatever he intends, it's not helpful in the moment. And, not that I'm fishing for sympathy here, but if you happen to be a preacher, it's possible to say the wrong thing, not just to your neighbor with the obnoxious cat, but to a whole churchful of people at once.

But imagine you're arguably the most influential person in human history thus far. You're an itinerant rabbi who healed people and spoke wisdom that, 2,000 years later, even though you lived and taught much closer to Memphis, Egypt, people in a place called Memphis, Tennessee would sit somewhat attentively while a preacher tries to untangle something you said. Are you with me? Well, imagine you're that guy.

Wait a minute. Is asking a roomful of Memphians to imagine that they're Jesus Christ actually the worst thing I've ever said? Let's go with it anyway. Go ahead and imagine that you're Jesus and the worst thing you ever said gets captured in the fifteenth chapter of the gospel according to someone named Matthew. Hopefully this makes you feel a little better about the briefer shelf life for the faux pas of folks like us.

A Canaanite woman whose daughter has a demon comes to Jesus pleading for mercy. First he says nothing to her at all. Then he says "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Then he says, "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." What in the world are Christians to do with the Jesus of Matthew 15?

The first thing we might do is dispense with that nonsense about his sinlessness, right? To refer to this woman as a dog is not just insulting. It's probably a first century ethnic slur. What could be a more sinful thing to say than this?

But, for me at least, the teachings and doctrines of the Church are most useful, not when I dissect them rationally, but when I look at the world through them. And they can be most provocative and illuminating when holding onto a doctrine means holding on to a contradiction. Like the paradox embedded in a Zen koan that a monk keeps muttering.

Here's what begins to happen as I trust that if the Church passed down the notion of Jesus being without sin, there must be a wisdom in doing so. It gets me to pause for a moment and wonder where the inflection point is where sin really intrudes in a conversation or a relationship. It might not be where I think it is at all.

I'll go ahead and confess another sin of mine right here. Which is that we didn't have to read that much of the gospel today. The first ten verses, that bit where Jesus says, "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles"... that's optional. Sorry. It's my fault that they'll be out of eggs Benedict by the time you get to brunch.

But it's startling that, in the exchange Jesus has immediately prior to saying the awful things he says in Matthew 15, he says we should attend carefully to what comes out of our mouths. But what if Matthew knew exactly what he was doing when he placed these two stories side by side? What if he anticipated and even intended the dissonance in us as we hear what comes out of Jesus's mouth a little later that day? And what if the conversation between Jesus and a woman with a demon possessed daughter is holy, not because the people who engage in it somehow floated free of the prejudices and tribalism that still shape the way you and I see this world, but because the people engaged in this conversation stay engaged until a hairline crack in that prejudice and tribalism opens up in both the rabbi and in the woman?

The Canaanite woman, of course, is one of the great heroes of the gospels, in my opinion. But we might assume too quickly that her virtue is in the way she stands toe to toe with Jesus and refuses to accept his assessment of things. That's not what happens, is it? Quite the opposite. She comes as a person who desperately needs for her daughter to be healed. She comes begging for mercy and will relinquish ego, pride, maybe even her very identity if it means that her girl might be delivered from her demons.

We should also be careful about making the woman too meek. If some guru calls my daughter a dog, I'm not going to encourage her to wait patiently at his feet a little longer, unless she's gathering herself to let him know how she feels, possibly with the back of her hand.

Meek acceptance isn't the woman's strategy either. What stuns me most about her is that she stays present, attentive, and open with a person who has just insulted her, because he might be the one who possesses what her life most needs in that moment.

Is this something you know how to do? If so, how do you do it? How can you stay open to the possibility that there is more to the person who has just humiliated you than cruelty, even if he has something you or someone you love desperately needs? That very capacity...her capacity in particular, Jesus says, is the apex of the mysterious thing called faith he roamed Palestine in search of.

And what about supposedly sinless Jesus? Well, it's true that there are stories in many traditions of mystics whose teaching involved saying or doing what initially appears offensive or even cruel in order to make a point. It's not impossible that Jesus was intentionally bringing into view the sinful structures and bigotries that this Canaanite woman lived under every day. It's only in their shadow that he holds her up to his disciples and to us as a person of great faith. As one who sets aside ego and self to stay alert to the possibility of grace in a moment of crisis.

But what if Jesus really had been shaped by a world with a certain disposition toward women and Canaanites? Remember that he has been working toward a realignment within the religion he loves. The holiness codes and practices had their uses, and it's clear that Jesus loved them deeply. But they could also go awry. If we believe in a certain form of purity, we will distance and protect ourselves from the impure. We will probably also attempt to deny and distance ourselves from what we think is imperfect and impure within ourselves. I try to keep those films of my greatest failures stowed deep in the attic, but out they still come from time to time. Don't yours?

So what if what Jesus's life shows us is not that he had a mind that was completely protected from impure thoughts that were shaped by what's least godly and good in his world. But rather that he could be so un-protective of his identity, and so attentive to the person in front of him, that in him, the old patterns might actually change. What if all of the holiest moments are not when pure words or actions proceed from some uncontaminated heart or history, but when a soul or a story manages to let even something it believes to be central to its identity go, if attention in the unfolding present requires it? Put another way, what if goodness has less to do with staying strong and pure, than with staying open to being changed?

In the end, faith looks like a kind of clear attention. A truthful way of seeing the world as it is or the person in front of us for who they are really can change everything, beginning with ourselves.

Peter Matthiessen once wrote, "The physicist seeks to understand reality, while the mystic is trained to experience it directly. Both agree that human mechanisms of perception, stunted as they are by screens of social training...give a very limited picture of existence."

Maybe the miracle that happened between Jesus and a Canaanite mother one day, was simply that the screens that should have kept two people from seeing each other fell away. And each of them was changed by what they saw in the other. Moreover, we're told that something shifted in the way things are more deeply because of their faith. For the story ends, not with the rabbi and the woman becoming unlikely friends, but down the street, in a room neither of them happens to be standing in at the time. A room where a girl, thanks to one mother's fierce, egoless, clear-eyed faith, is inexplicably relieved of her demons and lives.