

April 2, 2017

TEXT: Matthew 15:21–28

TITLE: Unfaithful Phrases: You're Unlovable

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The good Lord works in mysterious ways. This refrain from the opening song of *A Color Purple* could not ring more true we look at our Gospel lesson for today. Sure, we know the outcome of the text today—and we even expect it: Jesus heals. Jesus saves.

But the Savior at the heart of the text is doing his work in ways that don't, frankly, make much sense to us at all. His ways are, well, *mysterious* to say the least! Let's take a look at his unusual behavior:

- First, Jesus is not heading out to help those in need. He is, rather, is heading to the hills—withdrawing to a region near the border.
- Then, when Jesus is approached by a woman begging for him to heal her daughter, he *ignores* her.
- Next, when his disciples encourage him to send this petulant woman away, he does not act as he did when children were brought to him, or a blind man cried out, calling them all to his side. Rather, he goes with their advice and tries to send her away, telling her that he was not, in fact, sent here to help her out. His grace is provisional, limited, designated for a few. This woman that she is simply not on his “to do” list. As a Canaanite and a woman she is an outsider twice over. He's not here to help *her*.
- And finally, even when this woman prostrates herself before him on behalf of her daughter Jesus' response stops us all in our tracks. He essentially calls this woman a *dog*.

How are we to understand this exchange? Is *this* the same Jesus we love and serve? Is this the brand of love we strive to model? What is happening here? How *is* God working in this strange story?

Some commentators try to explain this story away, even though this story show up in three gospels with the same complicated details. Some suggest that Jesus is using the word dog as a pet name of sorts. Some suggest that Jesus is not speaking his own mind, but trying to reflect the views of the community and call them out before turning them on their head. Others suggest that this passage allows us to see a very human side of Jesus—one that is tired, one that that has reached the end of his rope.

For better or worse, this story sounds a lot like the world in which we live. Many—in community, in government, and even in the church—try to draw lines that determine who is in and who is out. We've heard it all before. People invest a lot of time and energy into making rules and setting standards to determine who belongs, who is worthy of acceptance and who is left to stand on the outside looking in.

Worthiness and belonging has been such a big deal that it has been debated and even *legislated* in the life of the church and the life of the state. We see it in our own government today: from executive orders that says who can enter the country to state laws that say who gets to decide which bathroom a person can use. We keep on debating the question of worthiness. Who is worthy of belonging? Whose rights are worthy of representation? Who is worthy of access to resources—even basic ones like clean water, health care and public education?

These questions are not new to us, are they? They materialized well before this country was born, and they were imbedded into our constitution. The right to vote, for example, was only available to free white men at our nation's founding—African American men won the right to vote in 1869, and women fifty-one years later, in 1920. Yet even today legislation is debated about who has the right to vote—who is worthy of having their views and needs represented: Do those who live in this country and pay taxes have the right to vote if they are not citizens? Do those who are incarcerated have the right to vote while imprisoned? Do American citizens have the right to vote if they do not possess a photo ID? It has always been clear that some have been deemed worthy of the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness and others have not.

This question of worthiness is compounded, as it was in our Biblical text for today, when one wears multiple hats of marginalization. As a woman and a non-Jew—especially a *Canaanite*—the woman in our text was an outsider twice over. As a woman she should not have been speaking to a man; as a Canaanite, she should not have been speaking to a Jew. The rules were clear. She was crossing lines. Her position in life generated additional layers of hurdles she had to overcome if she was to access the resources she needed to heal her daughter. She was doubly wounded, nevertheless, she persisted.

Today, we have a word for this: “intersectionality.” Professor and civil rights activist Kimberle’ Crenshaw uses the word “intersectionality” to refer to the fact that “many of our social justice problems like racism and sexism are often overlapping.”¹

She gives the example of the case of Emma DeGraffenreid, an African American woman who claimed that she was not hired for a job at a car manufacturing plant because of race and gender discrimination. The judge dismissed her suit on the basis that the employer *did* hire African American people and *did* hire women. However, Crenshaw points out, all of the African American people who he hired were men employed in manufacturing positions, and the women he hired were white, assigned to secretarial work. Crenshaw goes on to point out that:

Only if the court was able to see how these policies came together would he be able to see the double discrimination that Emma DeGraffenreid was facing. ... (But) rather than

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https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality/transcript?language=en

broadening the frame to include African-American women, the court simply tossed their case completely out of court.²

Language around intersectionality invites us to notice that every layer of bias a person faces adds a layer of oppression or hardship or a label of unworthiness.

We see this easily when looking at wages of women in the United States today: white women make \$.80 to every dollar a white man earns. African American women earn 63 cents to every dollar a white man earns, and Hispanic and Latina women earn only 54 cents to every dollar a white man earns.³ Adding in additional factors—factors like class, age, marital status, sexual identity, religious expression and ability—further complicates the equation, whether we are looking at equations around income, access to resources or representation in any layer of government.

Intersectionality reminds us that if we wish to truly advocate for justice in its broadest, most whole expression, we must be aware of the complex dynamics generated by these intersections of marginalization. We must stop and notice how they impact the real lives of real people. We must be willing to have our lives disrupted by the cries of those who are different from us, just as we then need to stop in our tracks so that we can listen to the stories and hear the needs of those who do not fit tidily into our inner circle.

The turning point of the Biblical story happens when the woman refuses to cave to the definitions that have been thrust upon her. She refuses to believe that her daughter is unworthy, that her outsider status is set in stone, or that her voice doesn't matter. She reframes Jesus' own argument and insists that even the scraps he might have to offer are more than enough to heal her child. *She claims the audacious truth that there is enough for everyone.* God is a God of abundant life and has enough to offer for *all* people—woman, man, Gentile, Jew, slave, free, gay, straight, cis-gendered, transgender, Muslim, Christian, Mexican, Iraqi, American...

The Canaanite woman knew what this world so often forgets. Our society is most whole when ALL are well—not just when those in some self-defined inner circle find their position most secure. The health of the “outsider” does not compromise the health of the “insider” —in God's economy, there is enough love, enough mercy, enough wholeness, enough redemption to go around.

And while we are reminded of our need to listen to and learn from the voices of anyone who is marginalized, we must likewise remember that it is not the responsibility of the oppressed to lift the yoke of their own oppression. We must not ignore, excuse nor insult those crying out for help. Rather WE should seek out those in need, especially those whose needs may differ from our own. We should examine what lie we might need to surrender in order to validate a truth different from our own. We should lead with love.

² *ibid*

³ http://www.aauw.org/aauw_check/pdf_download/show_pdf.php?file=The-Simple-Truth

We must remember that these layers of oppression are not only a justice issue. Oppression is also a crisis of the soul. Oppression delivers a message that a person is also unlovable—by others and by God.

Yet we have the power—inside of us and through us—to give voice to the truth of our faith: We have ALL been created in God's image, redeemed by God's grace and are sustained by God's spirit.

We are loved, in spite of the lies we are told that suggest otherwise. *We are loved* in spite of the people and systems that try to bring us down. We are loved in spite of our worst sin or deepest wounds. We are God's. We are loved.

I'm grateful for the witness of this Canaanite woman. She reminds me to speak up until my voice is heard. She reminds me to not accept faulty logic that claims that some are more worthy of respect, resources or love than another. She reminds me that although I can make a list of the micro and macro aggressions I have faced as a woman, there is *always* someone who faces more bias and hardship than me. She reminds me that I need to check my own privilege and dare to advocate for those more vulnerable. She reminds me that advocating for justice is difficult business that can, at times, bring us to our knees.

And she reminds me that God has enough love for all people, everywhere—not because of who we are, but because of *who God truly is*. She reminds me that regardless of the hierarchies established by the world, God has established us all as equals in God's sight—equally created in God's image, and equally tarnished by sin, yet equally redeemed by God's grace poured out for us in Jesus Christ.

We might stand in the center of the circle with the disciples. We might find our place in the margins with the Canaanite woman. Or maybe we find ourselves with a foot in both worlds. Regardless of our social location, may we carry with us the immutable truth: we are ALL children of God. No one can take that from us. We are here. We are God's. We are enough.

As we embrace this good news, may we remember too that this truth, this love is not just for us...it's for everyone.

For this we can say thanks be to God.