

**August 20, 2017 – Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
“Crickets?”**

**Rev. Dr. Scott Landis
Psalm 67; Matthew 15:10-28**

“She appeared to violate the rule. She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted.” Words uttered by Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell to rebuke and silence Senator Elizabeth Warren during her lengthy critique of then nominee Senator Jeff Sessions for the position Attorney General of the United States.

It was a moment in history that stunned Senate Democrats (among others), and became a rallying cry especially for women insisting their voices be heard on this and other matters particularly when truth and justice are seemingly being overlooked and in some cases outright denied.

I couldn't help but recall that memorable incident on the Senate floor when I read and prepared my sermon based on this often-overlooked story from the gospel of Matthew – a story that highlights rather dramatically the humanity – which includes the fallibility – of Jesus – for in this case, Jesus makes an egregious mistake on which the woman in the story calls him out. In fact, I flirted with a sermon title suggested by one of my bible study participants for today, “Nevertheless, She Persisted.” Let's take a real close look at what happened here and how Jesus responded.

The main character in the story is a Canaanite woman – a descriptor used in lieu of her name to ensure we all know she is an outsider – likely a woman of color – from the “other side of town.” You know, the wrong side of the tracks. She is definitely NOT a member of the household of Israel.

This Canaanite woman has a daughter who, in her words, was tormented by a demon. She is beside herself with anxiety. We can imagine she has cared for this girl for years, has likely tried many means of cure, but to no avail. And now she comes to Jesus in desperation. “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Hear my cry – attend to my need. In so doing, she implicitly acknowledges that she believes Jesus has, indeed, come from God and is the source of healing. We know this because she references him as “Lord,” and “Son of David.”

Such action by a woman – any woman let alone an outsider from Canaan – would be unthinkable. Women were to be seen – not heard – and certainly not in public. They spoke only to other women, to their children, and to their husbands, but even to them only privately and at home. This unnamed woman apparently broke the rules. She approached Jesus whom the disciples tried to shield.

They were the first to condemn her action. “Lord, send her away. She keeps shouting after us,” they contended.

To which Jesus makes his first puzzling comment – words that seem so unlike him. He said, “I was sent ONLY to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Really, Jesus? No time, no concern for others outside of your own tribe? Yours all of the sudden became an exclusive club? Since when did you become such a rule follower? It’s a theological conundrum and words that are very difficult to justify in any sermon. But there they are - but then the story takes an even darker twist.

“Lord, help me!” she undauntedly exclaims. And then, as my administrative assistant is wont to say – the response - crickets. It’s an expression Elizabeth uses when there is silence in the room following a rhetorical question, or a plea for volunteer help. Silence – as heads look toward the floor in embarrassed avoidance. Nada. Nothing. Crickets. That's all that was heard following her passionate plea.

After the prolonged, awkward silence Jesus says something even more offensive – essentially referring to her as a dog. Looking right at her he says, “You don’t take food from children’s mouths and feed it to the dogs,” reiterating, yet again, “My time, my resources, my energy is for the House of Israel – not the Canaanites.” It's a statement that could have left her in shame, walking away hopeless, silenced.

After all, she was warned. She was given an explanation, but this woman was undeterred – she persisted. She responded, “Yes, but even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the masters’ table,” her conviction that, indeed, there IS a wideness in God’s mercy – plenty of grace to go around. In God’s kingdom there is enough love, enough compassion, enough healing, enough of whatever is needed for everyone.

[Perhaps quote hymn – There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy]

That's when the shift occurs. Jesus finally begins to see her and to hear her need. It's where we begin to see the real Jesus. He realized his mistake. It is now clear to him that he was wrong. The woman in front of him was also a child of God despite any racial-ethnic origin. No matter her gender. None of that mattered. Before Jesus was human need, suffering personified and he had the ability to make a difference in her life. Recognizing her faith, he blessed her, and her daughter (according to the writer) was healed immediately.

It’s painful to read, but I’m glad this story is included in the Bible along with the many others that make Jesus look so good. Because in this story Jesus appears human to me. He disappoints. He fails to stand alone and condemn injustice. He succumbs to the disciples’ weariness and for a moment wants nothing more than to be with his own and he makes a big mistake.

It takes the persistence of this woman to jar him into reality and remind him of his true call – that he came to demonstrate the way of love and justice for all the people - for ALL people. [Pause]

When I watched the events that unfolded in Charlottesville, VA last Saturday on television, my initial response was to want nothing more than to turn it off. My rationale went something like, "If I don't see it, it doesn't exist." At least I believe that was my thinking. Kind of like Jesus and the disciples in this story. Enough! I just don't want to hear anymore. It's not my problem. What could I do, anyway?

The initial delayed response of our President was troubling, but I hoped, could be interpreted in a more positive light. His scripted statement on Monday gave me more hope. But then came Tuesday, and the press interview where his true colors and feelings were aired for all of us to hear. I was shocked and I was appalled. [Pause]

I imagine this Canaanite woman was similarly hurt when she heard the exclusivist if not racist remarks of Jesus – let alone to be referred to as a dog. Nevertheless, she did not give up. She persisted – and so must we.

I realize that all (well most) politicians try every means possible to play to their base - the ones who will vote to keep them in office, but when the President tipped his allegiance by affirming the supposed "good" in the neo-nazi, KKK, white supremacist demonstrators, I could not believe my ears. Rather than hearing the cry of human need now screaming from the grave of a peaceful demonstrator, he defended the perpetrators - an action and response I find inexcusable.

This story in Matthew is a rallying cry for each one of us to challenge words that are not true! She was not a dog. She was a child of God. She was not an Israelite, but she deserved the attention of a loving God. Yes, she violated a rule. But sometimes rules have to be broken in order for real truth to emerge. Jesus realized this and knew he had to repent in order to do that which was right.

I am not sure our current President is capable of doing the same. What I believe I heard last Tuesday were words from his heart – and they defiled him.

Did you hear Jesus' own words just before this incident? "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth that defiles." "What comes out of the mouth," Jesus said, "proceeds from the heart."

The words I heard on Tuesday from our President, I believe, proceeded from his heart – and they broke mine. As people of faith and as followers of the One who had the ability to recognize fault, repent, AND correct previous words or actions, I believe, we must do everything we can to do the same and to insist our leaders do so as well. In the words of the prophet, ours is to "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God." (Micah 6:8)

I cannot tell you what form that journey will take for you. That is a matter of discernment, a matter of conscience, and a matter between you and God. It may mean to make phone calls, to write letters, or more importantly to engage in conversations with family,

friends, colleagues, children, parents to talk about (those of us with light skin) our white privilege. To acknowledge that racism still exists in our country. To discuss how we contribute to it - what we must do to change. It may mean to participate in active protests, to contribute money to a cause for justice, or simply to become more deeply educated in the issues of our day. It begins with each one of us taking responsibility - not to silence or to hiding, but to become activists in our own way for the common good.

What I firmly believe is that this is not an invitation to violence or to respond with hate-filled speech. As a former First Lady once said, "When they go low, we go high." It is critical for us to take the high road. Like Jesus to admit when we are wrong. And then do everything in our power to make things right.

This is where our faith can make a difference – a vital difference. It will take courage to take the high road. That is rarely easy. It will, at times take resistance. It will invariably involve persistence. And it will necessitate vigilance as we listen, learn, and lean in to that which is good and right for all beings. [Pause]

It's amazing just how relevant the Bible is to our story today - this story and this woman's actions speak volumes to our current situation. Read it carefully. Listen to what God is beckoning within you. And then respond with conviction and with love.

Amen.