

**“Nevertheless She Persisted”**  
**Matthew 15:22-28**  
**August 20, 2017**  
**Central Texas Metropolitan Community Church**

On February 7 of this year, as the U.S. Senate debated confirmation of Senator Jeff Sessions to become Attorney General, Senator Elizabeth Warren spoke against the confirmation, criticizing his record on civil rights. When Senator Warren began to read a letter that Coretta Scott King had written in 1986, criticizing Senator Sessions’ conduct as a U.S. Attorney, Warren was interrupted first by Senate Chair Steve Daines, warning her of a Senate Rule which prohibits any senator talking badly about another senator. Warren asked to continue, and Daines allowed her to do so. At which point Senator Mitch McConnell interrupted her once again, invoking the Senate Rule, while Daines called for a vote to silence Warren, telling her to “take her seat.” Following the vote McConnell said, “She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted.” Senator John McCain said, “You don’t insult — whether it be from a letter, or from a message from God, or on golden tablets. That’s the rules of the Senate.”

Yet, that’s exactly what Jesus did in this morning’s text, using a racial slur, ironically enough, right after having been quoted as saying, “It is what comes out of the mouth that defiles [a person].” (15:11) First Jesus ignores a woman pleading on behalf of her daughter. Then he points out her Gentile otherness and refuses to help her out, claiming he was only sent to help his own kind. And finally he flings a common racial slur at her, implying that she was a dog. But nevertheless she persisted, insisting that Canaanite lives matter.

I’ve heard lots of explanations and excuses for Jesus’ behavior over the years, but I’m just not buying into them. I’ve heard how the word “dog” is better translated as “puppy,” so Jesus would have been calling her a lovable puppy. One such piece of nonsense claims, “It is as if Christ is calling her a ‘little dog’ with a subtle smile and a winking eye.” (<http://www.orthodoxroad.com/the-canaanite-woman/>) There is no hint of either a subtle smile or a winking eye in this text.

I’ve heard how tired Jesus was, and we all know how we can say things that we really don’t mean when we’re tired and exhausted. How he was even entitled to such behavior because he was trying to get the much needed rest that had been interrupted earlier, and this woman was intent on keeping him from that rest.

I’ve heard that he intentionally used silence to heighten the drama of the event, and he was doing nothing more than participating in the sort of banter that is typical between a rabbi and a student. Except this woman was not his student. And this was the same sort of request that he seemed more than willing to grant to over 5,000 people just a day or so earlier, the only difference being they were Jewish and she was Gentile.

If I were Jesus’ public relations agent, I don’t think I would have included this in the Gospel, because no matter what kind of spin you put on it, Jesus just doesn’t look very good here. Christ was acting in a very unchristlike way.

But what that means to me is he was a product of his society, just like you and I are. Jesus, no doubt, had grown up in a society which labeled Gentiles as “other.” We, too, live in a world of many “others.” Race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion are arenas in which we relegate people to the position of “other.”

Jesus implied the woman was a dog, and as long as he could think of her in terms of being a dog, he didn’t have to think of her as a human being. Today, of course, we have our own list of words that have been used against people of color, against women, against people who aren’t heterosexual or cisgender, and against non-Christians.

Jesus seemed to have been led to believe that there was such a thing as privilege in the kingdom of God. He says he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel, as if there wasn't enough love to go around for everyone. And heaven knows how many times I've heard, "We've got to take care of our own first."

Yes, Jesus was just like you and me in so many ways. But here's how he differed from many of us: he was teachable. A Canaanite woman's love for her daughter drove her to persist in her pleas for help. She wouldn't take "no" for an answer. She knew that she was as entitled as anyone else to a healing miracle. She knew that she was a child of God. And she wouldn't be turned away. And because of her persistence, Jesus came to understand that this woman and, indeed, every person was wonderfully made in the image of God.

Like Jesus, we can get it wrong. And then, in our encounters with whomever we think of as "other," we can have our hearts and minds changed.

Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis says, "We can get it wrong. And then we can get it right. We have to get it right. If we believe in the radical love of Jesus as a call on our lives, we must be clear that we are not saved until everyone is saved. And they are not saved, the people of God are not saved unless there is food on the table, clothing on their backs, and healthcare for their families." And I will add that we are not saved until white supremacy is a thing of the past. We are not saved as long as LGBTQ people are treated as subclass citizens. And we are not saved as long as non-Christian people live in fear for their lives and property.

This sort of talk may make some people uncomfortable. Clearly, Jesus and his disciples were uncomfortable in this morning's text. But he stuck around for the conversation. And we've got to do the same. We've got to.

Last week I was fortunate enough to be invited to lunch by the mayor of our city to talk about diversity in our city. After we had moved through the conversational niceties typical and absolutely essential for anyone who was raised in the South, he asked what I saw as challenges for diversity in the city. It was a good conversation, as he gave me an opportunity to speak honestly and openly from my own experience. This is the sort of dialogue that I think we all need to practice with each other. Because when we do, we also open ourselves up to the possibility of a transformed perspective, a new and different way of looking at other people. And quite frankly, that takes guts. It takes guts to be willing to change your outlook.

The author of Matthew's Gospel records Jesus as saying in this morning's text, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But in an about-face at the conclusion of the Gospel, Jesus, in giving some final instructions to his disciples, says, "Go therefore and make disciples of *all nations*." (28:19) Something happened to him. And I think the "something" that happened, occurred when a Gentile woman refused to be turned away, but instead, persisted. And in that persistence, she helped Jesus to see her as a human being, not as an "other," and certainly not as a dog.

May we be open to the persistent nagging of God's Spirit, encouraging us to have difficult conversations, to acknowledge that maybe we've got it wrong, and to have the guts to do what it takes to get it right. Amen.