

“Moving Beyond Bias: Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, June 25, 2017

Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Mark 7: 24-37 and Matthew 15:21-28 (NRSV)

Mark 7: 24-30

The Syrophenician Woman’s Faith

²⁴ From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice,²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.²⁷ He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”²⁸ But she answered him, “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”²⁹ Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Matthew 15:21-28

The Canaanite Woman’s Faith

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶ He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord,

yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.”²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Great Is Your Faith

The native mountaineering guides in the Himalayas known as Sherpas
are intimately acquainted with the face of Mount Everest.[1]

The Sherpas call Mount Everest *Chomolungma*,
and respect it as the “Mother of the World.”

However, many of the Sherpas know this mighty mountain
from one side – their only view is from their home valley.

They have been known to respond in disbelief
to images of Mt. Everest taken from the other sides.

Their disbelief changes to amazement
when they realize that something with which they were so familiar
can have other sides to it.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, “*The supreme religious challenge
is to see God’s image in one who is not in our image.*”
(*The Dignity of Difference*, p. 60)

“Only then can we see past our own reflections in the mirror

to the God we did not make up.”

(Barbara Brown Taylor, An Altar in the World, p. 100)

Great Is Your Faith

One day Jesus sent seventy disciples out to do ministry in his name.

Jesus sent them out ahead of him, telling them to travel in pairs,

to listen and learn and share the Good News with their neighbors.

According to Matthew,

Jesus was very specific about which neighbors He had in mind.

Jesus sent them forth, *instructing them*,

*“Go nowhere among the Gentiles
and enter no town of the Samaritans,
but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”* (Matthew 10: 5b-6)

Those words would come back to haunt him when he traveled out of Galilee...

Verse 21 *Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.*

In today’s passage for prayerful guidance, Matthew informs us

that Jesus went away, walking northwest into Gentile territory,
to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

Jesus was not out for a Sunday stroll or a casual jog along a country road.

He was putting some distance between himself and King Herod.

Herod the tetrarch heard about the reputation of Jesus,

and equated Jesus with John the Baptist,
whom he had already put to death.

Earlier Jesus and his disciples had travelled from Nazareth

to a lonely place in Galilee; however the crowds followed him there,
so they left Galilee altogether.

They journeyed to the edge of the Jewish world,

somewhere they hoped to lay low for a while.

Surely He would not be recognized there.

They were far from King Herod and the crowds in Galilee.

They were all set to relax along the Mediterranean Sea.

Instead of fishing for people, here they could unwind and fish for dinner.

Verse 22 *Just then a Canaanite woman from that region*

*came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David;
my daughter is tormented by a demon."*

Any chance the woman from Canaan had of being helped

was between slim and none.

Strike one: She was a Gentile, not a Jew, a Canaanite, not a Galilean.

Didn't we already hear that Jesus instructed his followers
to ignore anyone who was not Jewish?

Strike two: She was a woman, not a man,
so she had no cultural or religious right to approach a rabbi.

Where was the husband or son or handy male rep
to act as her intermediary to God?

Strike three: She was shouting, raising a ruckus, making a scene.

Is this how one comes near to the Messiah? Where's the respect?

Did she seriously expect that this visiting Teacher from down south
would heed such an unruly display of behavior?

And yet, what probably really caught Jesus' attention

--even more than these three swinging strikes--was her choice of words.

She called Him "*Lord, Son of David.*"

Great Is Her Faith

In Matthew nobody called Jesus Lord...except the nobodies.

Only no-names, people of little significance to anyone of significance

publicly recognized Him as the anointed One, the Messiah.

In Matthew it's the nobodies who call Jesus the Son of David:

nobodies like four blind men; nobodies like children who are shooed away;
nobodies like a nameless crowd of the lost, the last, and the least;
and now a nobody like this desperate mother.

Yet here she was, far from Galilee, a woman from Canaan,

identifying Jesus as the Son of David,
spiritual heir of the greatest king in Israel's history.

*"Lord have mercy, help me Jesus,
Son of David, have mercy on me, my Lord and my God!"*

Sometimes it takes a nobody to see God with a pure heart and the eyes of faith.

Sometimes it takes a nobody to remind somebody
that anybody should be loved by everybody.

Great Is Her Faith

Verse 23-24

*But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came
and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."
He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."*

Jesus was silent while all this was going on.

The disciples urged him to shun her, especially since they themselves
were having no success shushing and shutting her up,
shooing her away and shutting her out from His presence.

Verses 25-27

*But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."
He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."
She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs
that fall from their masters' table."*

Her challenge was gutting it out and cutting through the mess.

The Canaanite woman,

thinking first and foremost of her beloved daughter in need
--even though she was most likely hurt
and very possibly dismayed by his cutting remark--
responded to His tactless comment with grace and wit.

We read in the Bible in black and white and bright red letters

that Jesus of Nazareth equated her, a female, with a dog.

This was nothing new; sexism is as old as the hills.

We see such disrespect today.

How many of us have borne witness to what happens

when a woman is self-assured and outspoken,

a force to be reckoned with: she is labeled aggressive;
she may even be called the B-word.

However, when a man acts similarly,

he is respected, labeled assertive, and called in for the promotion.

Recently a preacher friend of my wife Betty

stood in the pulpit and told her congregation that for the first time
after years of faithfully serving Jesus and His Church
she was going to play “the woman card.”

She proclaimed that she is sick and tired of being sick and tired

of the patriarchy, the double standards, the lower pay grades,
and the sexism of our male-dominated culture.

Another good soul, this one hard at work in the corporate world,

said that she can testify from first-hand experience
the ceiling above that limits her advancement is not made of glass;
the ceiling is lined with men.

Great Is Your Faith

So after she spoke, saying, “*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs
that fall from their masters’ table,*” Jesus paused.

At least, I like to imagine that the Son of David paused to catch his breath
and think twice before he spoke again.

He may have been given pause,

for he’d just lost an argument yet gained some growth.

What transpired next was nothing less than spiritual transformation.

Verses 28-30 Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith!”

Let it be done for you as you wish.”

And her daughter was healed instantly. Then he said to her,

“For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”

So she went home,

found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

When Jesus called her “Woman” he was affirming her personhood,
her identity as a child of God.

No longer was she an “Other” or a dog or a heathen;

she was a mother, a neighbor, a new connection;
she was one with Him, with God, with the whole people of God.

This was truly a moment of unexpected grace.

All pretenses and prejudices, divisions and differences were shattered,
and in heaven the angels danced.

In that moment of recognition, respect, and relating,

her daughter was made whole, healed and renewed,
filled with new possibility and hope.

No longer was this child identified with disease and demons;

she was defined by God.

In this narrative she is unseen, yet we can see her smile across time and space.

Great Is God’s Faith

Jesus was changed, as were His followers.

Their disbelief changed to amazement, despair to delight, biases to tolerance

when they realized that something with which they were so familiar
could have other sides to it.

From that moment forward the Bible makes it clear that Jesus and the disciples

carried the Good News of God's love
to the everyone and everywhere they went.

After this encounter with the Canaanite woman, the Gospel went viral.

Great Is Your Faith

A couple weeks ago while we got ready for work and began our days,

Rachel Martin interviewed Shankar Vedantam on National Public Radio.[2]

Host of the Hidden Brain podcast, Shankar Vedantam is an American journalist

and science correspondent for NPR.

His reporting focuses on human behavior and the social sciences.

He's the author of *The Hidden Brain: How Our Unconscious Minds*

Elect Presidents, Control Markets, Wage Wars, and Save Our Lives.

The social scientist discussed ways we foster and hold on to biases,
and a possible solution to move beyond bias.

Years ago, Mahzarin Banaji and her colleagues

developed a simple test to better understand people's hidden biases.

It's called the Implicit Association Test or the IAT.

It's based on the way we group things in our mind.

When you say bread, my mind will easily think butter

*but not something unrelated to it.
Our brain, it turns out, makes associations,
and these associations can reveal important things about the way we
think,
including how we think about other people.
Banaji used this insight to create a sorting task.
[Her study interviewed people from all walks of life.]
Vedantum said: Sort for me faces of black people and bad things together,
words like devil and bomb and awful and failure.
Sort those on one side of the playing deck.
And on the other side, put the faces of white people...
...And words like love and peace and joy and sunshine and friendly and
so on
to the other side.
This turns out to be pretty easy for us to do because
... the association of white and good and black and bad
has been made for us in our culture.
The Implicit Association Test doesn't end there.
After sorting white and good into one group
and black and bad into another,
you now have to do it again the other way.
Group black with good and white with bad.
And when you try to do that, the data show that we will slow down,
that we can't do it quite as fast
because black and good are not practiced responses for us.
Banaji thinks the IAT is measuring a form of bias
that is implicit or unconscious.
Traditionally, the field has found that explicit biases
predict behaviors that are under our conscious control,
whereas implicit bias predict things are a little bit more
automatic,
a little bit more difficult to control.
...the test has tapped into the mind of the community as a whole.
Banaji and others say that while implicit bias does act on individuals,
its strongest effects may be at the level of the whole community.
Individuals can do their part to limit the effects of bias on their behavior,
but if you want to fix the bias itself, well, that takes the whole village. [3]*

Great Is Our Faith

We – the whole village, the faith community -- can do this.

With the faith of a mustard seed we can overcome our biases

and move beyond them, toward one another,
just as Jesus did before us,

just as we are called and encouraged to do so in such a time as this.

Out of Appalachia comes this tale of Old Joe and the Carpenter (adapted). [4]

Old Joe lived way out in the countryside, and he had one good neighbor.

They'd been friends all their lives.

And now that their spouses were buried and their children raised,

all they had left were their farms... and each other.

However, for the first time, they'd had an argument.

It was over a stray calf that neither one really needed.

It seemed as though the calf was found on Joe's neighbor's land

and so she claimed it as her own.

But Old Joe said, "No. That calf has the same markings as my favorite cow,

and I recognize it as being mine."

Well, they were both a bit stubborn,

so they just stopped talking to each other.

That happened about a week before,

and it seemed that a dark cloud had settled over Old Joe...
until there came a knock at his door.

As he opened the door, he saw a young man with a box of tools on his shoulder.

He said, "I'm a carpenter, and I'm looking for a bit of work."

Old Joe brought him into the kitchen and sat him down

and gave him some stew that he had on the back of the stove.

While they were eating and talking,

Joe decided that he liked this young fellow.

He said, "I do have a job for you.

Look right there through my kitchen window.

See that farm over there? That's my neighbor's place.

And you see that [creek] running right down there between our property lines?

That creek wasn't there last week. My neighbor did that to spite me.

She took her plow up there,

and she dug a big old furrow from the upper pond and flooded it.

Well, I want you to do one better. Since she wants us divided that way,

you go out there and build me a fence – a big, tall fence –

so I won't even have to see her place no more!"

And the Carpenter said, "Well, if you have the lumber and the nails, I got my tools,

and I'll be able to do a job that you'll like."

Old Joe went into town for a bit, so it was about sunset when he returned.

When Old Joe pulled up in that wagon,

his eyes opened wide and his mouth fell open...

because there wasn't a fence there at all.

It was a bridge!

A bridge now went from one side of the creek to the other!

His neighbor was just starting to cross the bridge with her hand stuck out,

and she was saying, "Joe, you're quite a fellow to build this bridge.

I'da never been able to do that. I'm so glad we're going to be friends again!"

And Old Joe, he put his arms around his neighbor

and said, "Oh, that calf is yours. I've known it all the time.

I want to be your friend, too."

About that time, the Carpenter started pulling his tools into the box

and then hoisted it onto his shoulder and walked away.

And Joe said, "Wait, come on back, young fellow.

I want you to stay on. I got lots of projects for you.”
The Carpenter just smiled and said, “I’d like to stay on, Joe. Really, I would.
I can’t, though. I got more bridges to build.”

Great Is Our Faith

Our relationships need the grace of God, each and every day,
to cross the bridge over chasms, to see the Christ in one another,
to see the fences we built,
and to decide to create and walk through a gate,
to meet our friend, our neighbor, our God.

The supreme religious challenge for disciples today and tomorrow
is that Jesus intends to love those who are on the outside looking in,
the nobody and the anybody, the somebody and even everybody;

He is sending us ahead of him to do the inviting,
to make ready the feast, to set an extra place at the Lord’s Table.

Our disbelief changes to amazement, our despair to delight, our biases to tolerance
when we realize that something with which we are so familiar
has another face.

All power be to the Creator, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[1] From Jacob Bronkowski’s Science and Human Values, reprinted in Christian Century, May 17, 2011.

[2] Shankar Vedantam, NPR News. *Copyright © June 13, 2017 NPR Morning Edition.*

[3] Shankar Vedantam, NPR News. *Copyright © June 13, 2017 NPR Morning Edition.*

[4] "OLD JOE AND THE CARPENTER – A Tale from Appalachia" Pleasant DeSpain. ADAPTED from **Peace Tales** by Margaret Read MacDonald, 2005.