

FCC Winchester Sermon – September 16, 2020
By Rob Skinner – Scripture: Matthew 15:21-28

For as long as there has been literature, the most compelling heroes have been the ones with really interesting flaws. Of course, in the downer Greek tragedies, these flaws always brought about the hero's downfall and destruction. The end. Not much narrative arc there, pretty much just a slope. I for one prefer the modern more formula, where heroes suffer and struggle because of their flaws, which makes it all the sweeter when they are redeemed and prevail at the end. Yay. I mean, come on, catharsis is exhausting.

But what about when the hero of the story is Jesus? Do flaws or even just blind spots make him a more compelling figure, or make the Gospels a better read? In today's scripture, Matthew's account of Jesus and the Canaanite woman has some pretty cringy moments. Not long after the feeding of the 5000, Jesus and the disciples leave Israel and go to the cities and Tyre and Sidon in Phoenicia – now the coast of southern Lebanon. A local woman approaches them and shouts that her daughter is tormented by a demon. Matthew goes out of his way to refer to her as a Canaanite, even though that is a term that was very out of date by Jesus' day – this is the only time it is used anywhere in the Gospels. In Mark's version of this story, the woman is called a Phoenician, which is how she'd have been described in the language of the day. Recall that the ancient people of Israel were told by God to annihilate the Canaanites when they arrived in the Promised Land. For Matthew to use the term Canaanite is quite pejorative, and seems intended to show that the woman is *very* much not a Jew. She is the other. But still, she calls Jesus "Lord, Son of David," terms of great respect that recognize him as the coming of the Jewish messiah.

And how does Jesus respond to this nice shout-out? First he ignores her. Then when the disciples beg him to do something because her shouting is driving them nuts, Jesus says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Sorry, Gentile lady, too bad about the demon and all, but you're not part of my job description. I'm really focusing my game on saving the Jewish people from the Sadducees and the Pharisees, and maybe the Romans. But yet she persisted, now kneeling before him: "Lord, help me." And then he says what sounds like the most un-Jesus-y thing: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Did he really just say that he's reserving his healing powers for the real children of God, and not for the Gentiles who are more like dogs? And did he really just say that after showing up with his whole entourage for a visit in *her* home town?

Still undeterred, the mother doesn't slink away, she runs with his probably insulting metaphor and turns it back into a complement of him and a show of her faith and humility: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." I may be a dog, but there is in you so much of God's healing grace to go around that I can be sustained by leftover crumbs after you've taken care of the chosen people. So finally Jesus relents, saying "Woman, great is your faith." And her daughter was healed.

The commentary about this story is all over the map, and seems mainly to follow either of two variations. First is the Perfect Jesus variation. Come on, this is Jesus – he doesn't really diss people like that. This was him showing a little tough love – as a test of the woman's faith and a teaching moment for the disciples. This exchange was really more like a Socratic dialogue, with

Jesus posing a challenge through his dog analogy, and the woman rising to the challenge and using the analogy to illustrate the strength of her faith – which the disciples probably wouldn't have expected from a Gentile woman. This is Jesus as Willie Wonka. Oh Charlie, congratulations. I knew you'd pass the test and not give away the Everlasting Gobstopper – the whole chocolate factory is yours! Color me skeptical.

The alternative to the Perfect Jesus variation is what you might call the Evolving Jesus variation. The thinking goes like this: at this relatively early stage of his ministry, Jesus really did see his mission as being focused on the Israelites. But when faced with the unyielding faith of this Gentile woman – a Canaanite, no less – Jesus actually changes his mind about helping her, and continues a process of understanding that his calling is maybe quite a bit broader than he had thought. In this variation the exchange isn't a test for the woman and a lesson for the disciples: the test and the lesson are for Jesus.

If even Jesus himself can come to understand new aspects of God's call by listening – maybe even reluctantly – to a voice that seems so unlikely a source of God's word, what might that tell us as we try to follow the example of Jesus? The woman is literally shouting at Jesus, repeatedly. She won't take no for an answer. While she is beseeching Jesus, she also presses back on his logic and challenges his assumptions. She is persistent and she is annoying, and just maybe she is the voice of God helping Jesus grow in his understanding of God's plan for him.

The events of recent months have led me to take a renewed look at what I am called to do to help end racism and remedy its historical effects. I consider myself progressive in my thinking, and I tell myself I understand at some level – and strive to understand better – the unfair privileges I receive as a beneficiary of racism and my implicit biases that affect my own actions and decisions. But I also know that having well-meaning sympathy with the cause and having better self-awareness is not all that I am called to do. Being more “woke” and less biased myself is a good thing, of course, but at the end of the day that's really just all about me.

Feeling outrage about police violence and being supportive of anti-racism protests are also good things, but am I not being called to do more tangible things to end racism and remedy its effects? And to discern what that call is, I think I need to listen with more care – truly listen – to the pained and persistent shouts of my black, brown and native sisters and brothers. Those shouts are not just on TV, and not just about police violence and discriminatory public policies. Those shouts are being made in my world, calling out racial inequalities in areas where I have power to effect change.

I work at a big law firm. I'm one of the owners of the firm, and my partners and I are overwhelmingly white men. We work very hard to recruit racially diverse law students to join our ranks as attorneys – and overall we do a pretty solid job of putting together diverse incoming classes of associates. But then the diverse associates don't succeed. Fast forward nine or ten years to the partnership decision, and the candidates who remain are overwhelmingly white and disproportionately male. This is a pervasive truth across the profession, and we have scratched our heads for years about why attorneys of color seem not to get traction and find long-term success in our firms.

Well, the terrible events of this year burst the damn of polite avoidance. We are being told in detail by our colleagues how different the work experience is for white and non-white professionals. And it is heart-breaking to hear the frustration and unhappiness and isolation that is experienced by my colleagues in a workplace for which I am responsible, and in which I have generally taken a lot of pride. Like the Canaanite woman, my colleagues have found the courage to raise their shouts, even knowing it would be uncomfortable to hear. Now it on me to discern what I am called to do in response, and use the tools I have to make real change.

Let us pray that the shouts of this summer will not stop, and that those of us with the power to effect change – and to prepare the way for God’s grace and healing – will hear them. Amen.