

WWJD: WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?

Matthew 15.21-28

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Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

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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.

In the wake of all that is happening in the world, I find myself being drawn back to that old question: WWJD – What Would Jesus Do? I remember there used to be bracelets and bumper stickers and there was a book.

If you do a little searching online you will discover that it has its roots with a great old Baptist preacher in London, Charles Spurgeon, who used this line in a sermon in 1891 quoting the great Roman Catholic classic, *The Imitation of Christ*, written by Thomas a Kempis in the early 1400s.

In the U.S., WWJD was popularized with, *In His Steps*, a book published in 1896 by Charles Sheldon, a Congregational preacher in Topeka, Kansas and who, by his own admission was a "Christian Socialist" influenced by another Baptist, Walter Rauschenbusch.

So if you were thinking that WWJD was simply code for a kind of conservative Christianity that could care less about the social realities we face today, you might want to think again. It is grounded in a socially progressive value that is Roman Catholic and Baptist in its DNA.

But if we think the easy answer to that question is that Jesus would always and immediately *do* justice and love mercy and walk humbly with his God, this is probably not the story you would want to tell.

To help us understand this story, the Bible scholars spend a fair amount of time describing the context and they remind us that Jesus has been trying to get away.

From a couple weeks ago, in Matthew 14, the news comes that his partner in ministry, John, has been murdered by the political powers of the day. And Jesus tries to get away by himself to a deserted place. But the crowds find him and he has compassion on them and heals them and feeds all – as Karyn Frazier suggested last week – 10,000 people; the 5000 men who counted and the 5000 women and children who didn't.

After the crowd is fed and the leftovers collected, Jesus “immediately” puts the disciples in a boat and sends the disciples away. He is finally going to get some alone time. But then a storm comes up out on the lake and Jesus has to go rescue them.

And just as they are safely docking the boat at the end of Matthew 14, the crowds find him again and they start begging him to heal them.

So the story for this morning for this morning in Matthew 15 begins: “Jesus left that place and went away to Tyre and Sidon,” a place along the coast around present day Beirut – a lovely place with sea breezes and blue water and, more importantly, lots of Gentiles who aren't likely to know who he is.

And then this Gentile woman shows up yelling, pleading for help for her daughter terrorized by a demon.

Now, before we are too hard on Jesus, let's be honest that we know how this feels. You have had enough. You have just written that check to the American Cancer Society and then that Humane Society ad comes up with the faces of all those forlorn and mistreated animals. You have just signed up for that protest rally in one place and your friends are heading off to another one happening across town.

I'm in the office having spent my whole day dealing with people's needs and then someone walks in off the street and has this story about some need that I am just not able or willing to do anything about. And then the accusations start: What kind of a Christian are you? What kind of a Pastor are you? What Would Jesus Do? Assuming, of course, that whatever they want, I and Jesus are obliged to do it.

And, like Jesus, some days, I've just had enough.

Those same Bible scholars point out that Jesus was trying to get away, *not* just because of those overwhelming and relentless needs, but because of his experience of rejection by his own people.

His hometown, Nazareth, rejects him in Matthew 13. His partner in ministry is killed by the political leaders of his own country in Matthew 14. As he is saving Peter from the storm later in that chapter, he says to his own disciples, "O you of little faith." By Matthew 15 the religious leaders of his own tradition are attacking him.

So we can understand that Jesus just wants to get away – some place beyond the borders of other people's needs and his own experience of rejection.

Roman Catholic Bible scholar, Megan McKenna, imagines:

All he wants is some breathing space, time apart, time to reflect and decide how to continue his mission in the face of rejection and misunderstanding by his own people.

Maybe it's understandable that when this Gentile woman shows up with her need, Jesus would say to his disciples, "Let's be clear: I was sent *only* to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

The problem, of course, is that those sheep don't think they are lost or, at least, Jesus is not the shepherd they are looking for.

Whatever grace and compassion we imagine for ourselves, rejection can take its toll.

There's all those people you just can't follow on Facebook anymore. There's all those family members and friends who won't follow *you* anymore. There's all that hateful rhetoric you just can't help but take personally and all those images of violence that make you shudder and make you want to run away.

And maybe if we ask ourselves the WWJD question – What Would Jesus Do? – we do so assuming, of course, that we are supposed to just keep subjecting ourselves to hatred and rejection and violence.

But that's not what Jesus did. At least not that day. He removed himself. He withdrew. He tried to get away. He "left that place and went away to Tyre and Sidon."

Now I have to say that I find all this context very helpful. I can understand the very human interaction that is going on and I can identify with the pressure of that overwhelming need and that experience of rejection by the very ones I feel called to serve.

But here's the thing. Understanding the context is no excuse for calling someone "a dog." That *is* what Jesus does in this story.

“Lord, help me,” she pleads as she bows to him and gives him exactly the respect he isn’t getting from his own people. And maybe it’s the hurt and the pain and the exhaustion but what Jesus does is to hide behind the language of a warped sense of justice or fairness or equal time. “It is not *fair* to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” Jesus says.

Right here, in the center – at the heart – of Matthew’s gospel is a story that describes the Jesus we follow as one who was not immune to the prejudice and the nationalist and the supremacist values of his culture and of his day.

And what that tells me is that, just because we claim to follow the way of Jesus does not mean that we are automatically immune from those forces as well. And to pretend that we are will have tragic consequences in what we *do*.

It says something that the business leaders of our nation have abandoned the President over those Charlottesville comments while there are religious leaders who remain steady in their support of someone whose rhetoric of “fairness” keeps trying to normalize and to excuse white-supremacist and neo-Nazi movements.

If this story is telling us that Jesus can’t get away with his nationalist and supremacist tendencies, then we better believe that we who claim to follow him, can’t either.

Understanding the context of his life, and of my own, is no excuse.

Whatever is going on in my own life is no excuse for dehumanizing someone else. Whatever has gone down in my life as a white person – whatever unmet needs or rejection or loss of privilege – it is no excuse for denigrating people of color. However proud I may be of my heritage, it is no excuse for dismissing the history of another.

Whatever else was going on in Jesus' life at the moment, what Jesus ultimately *did* in this story ... was *change*. And it should not be lost on us that it took a noisy, unrelenting, woman from the wrong side of the tracks to do it.

All I can say is thank God for Black Lives Matter and the anti-fascists and the climate change activists who keep shouting, who keep making noise, who keep trying to get us to do what Jesus did that day ... change!

In fact, you can make the case that Jesus wouldn't be who we claim him to be today without her. Without her, Jesus might have been an obscure prophet from a forgotten town in an out-of-the-way place.

But it was her persistence, her witness, her forceful driving home of her need that called Jesus into a larger understanding of his own life and calling. His own followers might be people of "little faith" but here was a woman from a different place and a different culture and a different religious tradition who was a person of "*great* faith."

Political tyranny and overwhelming need and personal rejection might make him want to get away from the crowd but Jesus could never get away from this stubborn question about who he was and what he was meant to do.

And that's the question we are facing this morning.

It's the question of how great or how little our own faith will be.

It's a question of how far we will extend ourselves beyond the borders of our own lives.

It's a question about whether we will run away from the world or whether we will allow ourselves to be changed by it and therefore to change it.

And let's be clear about what was at stake.

This woman's daughter was "healed instantly," the story says.

A little girl was healed that day.

Someone's daughter was freed from the forces that would otherwise destroy her life.

Another generation was born that day into a wider understanding of the world.

How we understand the “what would Jesus do” question is not just a question about us. It's about the future of our children. It's about the world we are trying to imagine.

And the answer to that question is not an easy one.

Like us, Jesus did not always and immediately do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with his God.

Like us, in the face of political tyranny and overwhelming need and personal rejection, Jesus wanted to – and needed to - get away.

Like us, Jesus was subject to the nationalist and supremacist tendencies of his culture.

Perhaps, like us, Jesus was annoyed by yet another protest demanding his attention.

But that's not the end of the story – at least it's not if *we* won't let it be. Because what Jesus *did* that day was change.

“Lord, help me,” the woman keeps yelling.

And today, if you hear *that* voice – that stubborn, nagging, discomfiting voice – please, for your own sake and for the sake of our children for the sake of our future together, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

This story and its context are beautifully and powerfully interpreted by Megan McKenna in *Not Counting Women and Children* (Orbis Books, 1994) pp. 121-143 and by Barbara Brown Taylor in *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) pp.61-67. The information about WWJD is from Wikipedia.