

“Imperfect Jesus”  
Matthew 15:21-28  
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost  
July 23, 2023  
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Good morning! Sisters, brothers, siblings:

We’re in a season here, aren’t we? Pastor Anita has married, and that photo – of her wedding with Scotty – if you are not melted by the photo she posted, you are hereby required to attend basic sensitivity training... immediately... there’s got to be one starting in the neighborhood now! And how wonderful that she is finally having a time of joyful rest from her labors among us! As she was preparing for her celebration, Anita sent out requests for some to preach in her time away. And one of the passages to be addressed was this one!

The scripture for today screams for attention! It leaps in front of us with a story of Jesus so strikingly awful, that whenever I hear it I want to ask those folks who gathered our scriptures, “What were you thinking?!”

This story tells of an encounter between Jesus and a woman, a foreigner, a story that can’t be prettied-up to make it say something “nicer” about Jesus. It’s ugly. I wince when I hear it. I wonder if you do, too.

But if we take time with it, something in its stark ugliness might become *fruitful* for us. And so, the story:

*Matthew 15:21-28 – from The Inclusive Bible*

Jesus has been teaching around the Sea of Galilee, and...

*Jesus left there and departed for the district of Tyre and Sidon. It happened that a Canaanite woman living in that area came and cried out to Jesus, “Heir to the House of David, have pity on me! My daughter is horribly demon-possessed.” Jesus gave her no answer at all. And his disciples came up and urged him, “Please get rid of her! She keeps calling after us.” To this Jesus said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.” But she fell at his feet and pled with him, “Help me, Rabbi!” He answered, “It isn’t right to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” “True, Rabbi,” she replied, ‘but even the dogs get to eat the scraps that fall from the master’s table.” Jesus then said in reply, “Woman, you have great faith! Your wish will come to pass.” At that very moment her daughter was healed.*

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I didn’t grow up in a church, but when I came into one as an early teen, and then at least through my twenties, I heard that Jesus was sinless, faultless – that Jesus was like God (or maybe was God), absolutely good, absolutely wise, and always perfect.

And then, this story, this story. Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman who begs for his help. He refuses her, but she won't get out of his face. He finally relents, and her request is granted. But some things in this story bothered me. They bothered me a lot!

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There are so many stories about how Jesus broke lines of division – how he spent time with those out of favor with the authorities, how he ate with people who were shunned. And these are treasures of inspiration and reminders of God's inclusive love. But then we find a story like today's, a story important enough to be found in both Matthew and Mark, and I wonder, What are we seeing here in Jesus? What's going on here?

If Jesus is perfect, he has to be doing good throughout this encounter. But if we face this story honestly, I think we have to say to that forced interpretation, NONSENSE! My grandmother Clara Hatfield (yeah, I'm a Hatfield) would say, "Horse feathers!" If you want, you can supply your own version of that expression.

First we have Jesus and his followers doing all they can to get rid of – silence! – a woman who is a foreigner. The keepers of the story add to the problem by leaving her unnamed, simply calling her a Canaanite. Jesus and his bunch have come to her territory, the area around the towns of Tyre and Sidon, the region called Phoenicia. Up to this point in gospel narratives, the adult Jesus has never traveled farther from Nazareth than about twenty miles... that would get you from here to Issaquah. And now suddenly he is several times that distance from home. If Jesus really spoke the words attributed to him, I wonder why he went there! But Jews are the ruling caste here, and it's certain this woman approaches him knowing she is of the underclass. But she has to try to get to him. There are reports of his healing power, and her daughter is terribly, frighteningly ill.

She calls out to him in her need: "Have mercy, heir to the House of David!" She knows she's addressing an Israelite. *She knows her place*. "My daughter suffers," she cries out. And he says... nothing! He ignores her completely, will not acknowledge she's even there.

Now the disciples at least notice her. They don't like her shouting, and ask Jesus repeatedly to send her away. But she... persists! "Please," she cries, "help my daughter."

And now Jesus notices, and he speaks – we don't know whether to the woman or to his followers, so he may still not be addressing her – "What? I wasn't sent to you or your kind! I've only come for the lost sheep of the house of Israel!" – that is, only to Israelites.

Well, she isn't taking it. So what does she do? She does what foreigners – and especially women – still have to do. She persists!! If we look and listen closely, we can see a parent – at some border crossing, in some long food line – a mother desperate for her child, and willing to turn anywhere for help!

She comes right up and kneels in front of him, and says, "Sir, help me!"

Now it's hard to pretend someone kneeling in front of you – begging you for something – isn't there. And God help us if we do it – walk by a person begging on the street – and pretend that person isn't even there!

And Jesus finally notices. Now he speaks to her: “It would be wrong to waste care on you – like throwing good food to dogs!”

She knows who's being called a dog here, and what does she do? She... *persists*! “Please, sir, even the dogs – even we of the low castes – get the crumbs from the master's table!”

And at this moment, everything turns!

I believe Jesus is shocked. She has refused to be denied, to be turned away, to be dismissed. And at last he speaks directly with her: “Woman, you have great faith. Let it be – that which you seek is granted to you.”

This is what I believe: through her determination, he has seen his narrowness – his cultural bias – challenged! And at least one of the walls of his prejudice has crumbled. In this encounter new ideas and forces are unleashed, and through them Jesus is – there's no other word for this – Jesus is saved! “Saved” in the good, old sense of the word – he finds salvation by finding wholeness!

Somehow Jesus is awakened... maybe we ought to say: *woke*! He is forcefully stopped, and by a severe grace, he sees his bias – his political, religious, his class and personal bias – maybe even his sexist bias – and his mind is changed!

This is good news! If Jesus, one whose path we try to follow, wasn't always fully compassionate, wasn't always embracing every person he met, didn't have everything worked out in himself from the beginning, how much more is he our brother? How much more is he like us? How much more a model for our living, our serving, even our dying?

To put it another way: If Jesus may be saved, so may we!

In her wonderful book, The Gifts of Imperfection, writer Brené Brown says, “Deep down, we want to take off our game faces and be real and imperfect.” And then she remembers the line from Leonard Cohen's song ‘Anthem’ that helps her when she's trying to be perfect, “There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.”

In these summer services, we're giving focus to what we say are our core values. This Sunday we look at our second stated value: “We will be present to one another and our neighbors in our personal relationships and by creating venues for engagement where we can learn about viewpoints different from our own.”

Don't we see this when we look carefully? One of us thinks we can do without another? Ignores, judges another as lesser and unworthy? And then something – thank God, something! – happens to crack open our walls! The one who is judged refuses to be denied their worth. That one makes a claim for a place in society. And we who made the judgments are redeemed from our own limits – maybe through cracks in our prejudices (doubts gnawing at our set ideas), or maybe

through something like grief – grief that comes when we who discriminate realize what we are losing – our own humanity. We need another. Jesus needed a woman of Canaan.

What do you need? Is there an opening in you, for you?

I've been thinking. What if we begin here, in our own church? I'm still pretty new here, but I wonder: What are our habits? How deeply are we enmeshed in whiteness? How many of our groups are led by white people? How long has it been... or has there ever been... a lay leader, a president of our congregation, who is a person of color? How many of us know what concerns have been raised in the BIPOC small group? Have you thought of attending the small group called "Brave Space"? We who identify as white do not flail at each other or shame ourselves there! We do, in strong love, encourage one another to face what most of the world runs from: the damaging effects of racism, in and around us.

Oh, which one among us has attained deliverance from our ideologies? From our ethnic pride? From skin color prejudice? Which one has yielded a position of power and privilege so that all might come equally to the table?

Let us be honest. And... **AND**... let none of us despair!

Let us look to one who made this journey before us. Not because he was perfect. Not because he had no need. But because he, like us, could learn, could grow, could gain deeper respect for others, their dignity, their humanity!

May it be that we are so encouraged, so called, so made whole!

May it be so.