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First Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 15:21-28

“Thoughts and Prayers: Prayer as Acts of Compassion”

Two weeks ago I began a new sermon series titled “Thoughts and Prayers”. The idea is to explore and lift up the many ways our own Book of Common Worship speaks of prayer, like prayer as protest and public witness, or prayer as singing – which we looked at last week. Today I’m lifting up prayer as acts of compassion.

Now when I think of prayer as acts of compassion, I think of all the get well cards or sympathy cards the Deacons send, and how those cards are prayers of compassion. I think of the meals people prepare for those who can’t fix one themselves because illness or grief prevents it. I think of the time our Stephen Ministers spend with people as prayers of compassion. When I think of prayer as compassion, I think of all these things, these ways we show our care and concern and put our prayers into motion.

What I don’t think about is the Jesus we see in our Gospel story – the one who shows absolutely zero compassion to a distraught mother who begs him to heal her daughter. “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David” she cries. It’s a prayerful plea she utters; a prayer that has been cried, sung and chanted for centuries by desperate people. “Kyrie eleison!” “Lord, have mercy.” She needs someone, anyone to show compassion for her daughter, but no one does. The disciples tell Jesus to send her away, and Jesus calls her dog. (Yes, he does.) Why I chose (back in June) this story for this topic baffled me all week, because there’s not much compassion happening here. But the longer I sat with it, the more it occurred to me that this story has something important to teach us about prayer, which is that sometimes prayer moves God to do something God would otherwise not do. And if the thought of that makes you slightly uncomfortable, you’re not alone. It makes me squirm a little, too.

When we meet up with Jesus today, he’s in the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon where prudent Israelites did not walk alone. This is non-Jewish territory; pagan country, where enemies worship idols. Why, just a few chapters back Jesus told his disciples not to go to the Gentiles. Differences of ethnicity, heritage, and

religion separate Jesus and the disciples from the Canaanites; and animosity runs deep. So it would have been shocking to hear a woman, *a woman*, shout at Jesus for help. But she's also a woman with a sick kid, and she's heard about Jesus' reputation. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." She's praying for him to heal her daughter of the demon that possesses her daughter.

But then the unexpected happens. "Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us," the disciples tell Jesus. The disciples clearly recognize the social offense of her shouting.

And Jesus answers her request with an equally offensive line: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." In other words, I'm not here to save you or your daughter.

She persists: "Lord, help me." Kyrie eleison, she prays. The prayer rings down through the centuries, whispered in hospitals, screamed out on battlefields. It's the cry of the soul in extreme, a raw witness to the depth and misery of the human condition.

Yet Jesus will not hear it.

"It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," he says. The food he brings is intended for the children of Israel, not the dogs; i.e. not you, he tells her.

Now, referring to Canaanites as dogs was a familiar and favorite insult of the Israelites. And as one commentator wrote, calling a woman a female dog had the same tone then as if it were shouted today in a high school hallway, or on the street.

This is not Jesus. I mean, Jesus is always the one reminding us that no one is outside the circle of God's love. But not here; here his words and behavior are troubling, and that's putting it mildly.

There have been attempts to soften his response. Some people say he was actually affirming the woman's worth by talking to her in the first place; others say he was testing her faith.

And I suppose that could be true. But I don't think it is.

His abrupt response to the woman may be startling, but back then it would have been expected. We tend to forget how radical Jesus' inclusiveness really was, when in reality he was raised in a culture of separation based race, gender, class and ethnicity . . . just like we have been. So he responds like anyone in his day would have responded to her: "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

But the woman doesn't miss a beat: "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

She faithfully persists ... even when Jesus — in very un-Christ-like fashion — withholds mercy, even when Jesus tells her she's not worthy of his compassion. The Canaanite woman persists because she believes God's grace is for her, too.

In this passage she alone sees clearly God's vision for creation — a vision in which all are shown compassion. She understands that in God's realm the circle of compassion includes those who've been pushed to the margins, those whose cries for mercy fall on deaf ears. She knows that the One who fed thousands on five loaves and two fish — and even had bread to spare! — has at least one morsel of grace to offer her. So the Canaanite woman persists; she calls Jesus back to himself: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

And so, in a stunning reversal, Jesus changes his mind and shows compassion because she showed initiative. Make no mistake, this is all her doing. Her prayer changes his mind.

If the thought of Jesus changing his mind makes you squirm a little, I'll admit that it makes me squirm a little, too.

But then I remind myself that Jesus was fully human which means he had to learn. He had to learn how to walk and talk, and he also had to unlearn some of those cultural prejudices he was raised on from a young age. He believed his mission was only to the lost sheep of Israel; but here he learned he was sent to save others, too. Even the daughters of Gentile women.

Of course, Christians have always believed that Jesus was fully divine, too. Which begs us to ask, does God ever change God's mind? Some people automatically think no. But the Old Testament stories suggest otherwise; that yes, God is able

to change God's mind. Time and time again we see God wanting to inflict punishment on people, only to see someone argue with God about why God shouldn't do that, and then God relents. Which means that, apparently, for the sake of mercy, even God sometimes changes course. So why wouldn't Jesus?

If you're like me, this still may feel a bit uncomfortable for you. We just don't expect to see the Jesus of the Gospels learn and change.

(And here, I'm going to use the words of someone else, who so eloquently wrote:)

"But why should this be so uncomfortable? Why must it be an embarrassing concession that Jesus learned something from this woman? Why should it be a sign of weakness to be open to change? What if the fact that Jesus could learn from her, that his mind could be changed, what if that is the whole point?"

Friends, there is no way around it, Jesus was changed by this woman. He was dead set against showing compassion to a pagan Canaanite's daughter. But then she cried out to him, he heard her and acted in a way that surprised all of us. And to this day, we continue to be surprised when we hear that Jesus – the very God incarnate, can change his mind.

But God can be changed. It's right there in the scriptures. Moses goes up to get the 10 commandments, the people below wait 40 days and then Moses' brother Aaron makes a golden calf and all fall back into idol worship. God is ready to strike every one of them down and then Moses speaks to God, imploring mercy for God's people and God relents.

In the Book of Jonah, God declares destruction for Nineveh. The people repent, turning from their evil ways and God relents again.

I could go on with other examples, but you get the idea. Prayer changes things because God hears us when we call out. As the theologian Rudolf Bultmann wrote: "Prayer is not to bring the petitioner's will into submission to the unchanging will of God, but prayer is to move God to do something which he otherwise would not do."

Friends, sometimes we have to remind ourselves that God is still acting, still working in this world and sometimes that means God changes. I mean, if God didn't, why bother to pray at all?

The Canaanite woman takes her place in a long line of Biblical figures who simply do not take "no" for an answer, who engage in what one scholar calls a "worshipful struggle," which goes all the way back to Jacob who wrestled an angel in the Book of Genesis.

Her faith is great because she speaks up for herself and others, calls out unfairness, challenges the status quo, and changes the Lord's mind. That is a powerful prayer. And in praying it, we see that Jesus is big enough not to be ashamed to learn something from someone he believed had nothing to teach.

Which makes me wonder, where is the Canaanite woman today? Who is she?

Is she crying out for justice in Gaza, or perhaps Ukraine? Has her son or daughter been injured, or taken hostage, or God forbid – killed?

Part of our Christian journey, our calling through our baptism, is to listen for those people calling out in pain or hunger or torment--to be attuned to their needs, to meet them where they are, and to let their prayers speak to us on their own terms. And sometimes they may seem as strange and foreign as that Canaanite woman. What she has to say to us today may sound as jarring as her words to Jesus. They may even shake our worldview and challenge our assumptions. But that's OK. Sometimes we need that. Because sometimes, the most helpful and faithful thing we do over the long haul, is to listen and learn, and allow ourselves to be pushed, like Jesus, so that we can open up to the Canaanite women of our day and age. Then we, too, can push and persist like the Canaanite woman so that justice may abound and prayers of compassion will be answered.

Amen.

Sources:

Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Volume 2, Commentary on Matthew 15:21-28
Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3, commentary on Matthew 15: (10-20) 21-28