

Whose Lives Matter?

Text: Matthew 15:21-28

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Can we change God's mind? It's rather surprising when we see it occurring in scripture. The most famous story is found in Gen 17 with Abram haggling with God over how many righteous people would need to reside in Sodom to cause God to spare that city from judgement. Abram gets God to agree to the amount of people he can count on his two hands. But we know the story. Even that wasn't enough. But God changed his mind to ease Abram's mind.

What about Jesus? Does he ever change his mind? In the story Barbara read today, a woman begs Jesus for his help. But he refuses. Why? Because it's outside of his mission statement. Yet she debates the issue with him and he is so taken aback that he eventually says the equivalent of, "Well, given that way of looking at it, I see your point. Your request is granted." It's one of the most intriguing stories in the NT, because it depicts Jesus as changing his mind. But more importantly, it's a startling story as well because Jesus was forced to come to terms with his own, implicit racism. You know what I mean. The kind of racism that we are all raised with. The one that says my tribe is better than your tribe. My team can beat your team.

I love this story because it gives me hope that we can all face our own implicit racism... and change. The story is profound because it provides a glimmer of hope that if Jesus could face down his own implicit racism, then maybe, just maybe, we can too.

Our Gospel text begins by telling us that Jesus travelled Northwest from the area of Galilee to the region of Tyre on the Southern coast of Lebanon. He needed respite from the hordes of people who had been begging him for a miracle of healing. Some Scribes and Pharisees angry over his popularity had traveled down from Jerusalem to challenge him over the effrontery that he dared to mix socially with common people and eat with the unwashed. How could he truly be regarded as a respectable rabbi if he let himself be defiled by the unwashed masses. So, Jesus really let them have it; both barrels. He denounced their implicit religious hypocrisy of calling people defiled because they didn't have enough money to live like the socially elite who had the leisure to practice ritual cleansing and purity practices. That is **not** what makes a people holy!

The story picks up some 30 miles away, in modern day Lebanon, in the southernmost city of the area known as Phoenicia. An exhausted Jesus had traveled there for a retreat from the hundreds of people who wanted a piece of him. And from those who wanted nothing more to do with him. Yet even here, he couldn't escape his own notoriety. He was accosted by a Syrophenician woman whose daughter needed that same kind of healing touch he had shown the Jewish crowds in Gennesaret. She begs Jesus for his help and wouldn't take "No" for her answer. The disciples want Jesus to send her away, just like they wanted to send away the crowd in the story Barbara preached two weeks ago when Jesus fed the 5000.

But Jesus stops and speaks to her. He tells her that what she asks is impossible. He was sent to help Jewish people find their way back to true faith in God, not Gentiles. But she doesn't take that "NO" for her answer, either. She knelt before him, "Please. Help me." So, he tries to explain that matter more fully. "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the **dogs**," he says. She still doesn't take "NO" for her answer. What she does is change the word Jesus used to describe savage, savaging dogs: "Sir, even a pet dog under the table eats the children's crumbs." That response took Jesus by surprise. I can see literally him shaking his head as he admires her tenacity. ***I can also see him change his mind.*** "Woman," he says, "Your faith is great." So. "Let it be done for you as you wish." And Matthew tells us that this woman's daughter was healed that day.

This is the Jesus we love in the Gospels. He stops when others would usher him on. He listens. He heals broken lives. We love these stories so much we can miss that Jesus tried to dismiss this woman with a casual use of an **ethnic slur**.... I know. That's a pretty staggering accusation. And if you're like me, your initial response is likely, "Jesus couldn't do that, could he?" He did. He referred to this Syrophenician woman's daughter as a **dog**. And he used a word that meant an **unclean, scavenging dog**. This was **the** racial slur condescendingly used by Jews to dismiss Gentiles as contemptible.

Some Bible background is necessary here. First: Jews didn't keep pet dogs. They were considered unclean animals. What dogs there were in Israel roamed in wild packs that scavenged food from land, from city dumps and from made midnight raids in villages. More than that, Lassie is far from man's best friend when it comes to the pages of the Bible:

- Proverbs reminds us that dogs are willing to re-eat their own vomit.
- Jesus tells believers not to give sacred things to dogs, because it is like casting pearls before swine.
- Jesus says that unclean scavenging dogs were licking Lazarus' wounds--making them even more unclean in the Parable of the Rich man and Lazarus.

Dogs were considered disgusting animals and by calling Gentiles *dogs* that meant they were equally contemptible. The fact that some Gentiles actually kept dogs as pets just showed how defiled these people could get. How could any pure person cohabitate with such unclean animals? For Jews, **dog was not just an ethnic slur**, it was the language of contempt.

That's what racial bigotry is like: my tribe is the superior one because our customs are superior to others. Bigotry comes in lots of different skin hues. Different religions. Different social mores. Different sexual orientations. We know the sound of bigotry when we hear it.

"Come here, boy."

"You trying to act like a fag?"

"We don't need all you slant-eyes taking over in businesses around here."

"Ragheads don't belong in our neighborhood."

"Why does she have to be such a *****"

I won't even say that last word. In fact, you may have winced as you heard me say some of the other words as well. You should. The thing is, we all know a dismissive, degrading **slur** when we hear it. Our courts are increasingly ruling that language like this is dehumanizing "hate-speech." We know that such words create power inequalities. Join that inequality to an expression of bigoted prejudice and what you get is a racist.¹ Racism can be blatant or it come across in the "dog-whistle" of political rhetoric. Like an actual silent dog whistle, it this is language that, in context, is meant to sway those "who have ears to hear" its prejudicial implications because it stokes their implicit racial fears. But in whatever form it takes, our better angels know that it should have no place in a civil society. **No place.**

So, what about Jesus? Should his use of a **slur** get a pass because he lived in a different era? In his day this kind of language was found in every society. I found lots of commentators who sought to soften the fact that this was a **slur**. After all, some note, this was a society in which a Jewish male was encouraged to pray daily thanking God that he wasn't born to be either a Gentile or a woman. That kind of inequality was baked into the first century world. But trying to soften its effect is like saying people should not be held responsible if they happen to live in a nationalistic culture with baked in notions of "Supremacy" of one part of the culture over another. This kind of help is like saying that Germany should be given a pass for allowing a new generation of Nazis skinhead racial purists to arise in their midst. This kind of justification is like trying to say that American blacks just need to get over how the South has always venerated its Civil War heroes as the true Spirit of the culture. It's their way of life and the explicit in your face examples of racial superiority have the patina of age and should just be left in place... No.

Here's what I believe. No one comes out of their own culture unscathed by its entrenched deceptions and unscathed by its inbuilt social injustices. And Jesus didn't either. No one has control over their race, over the social class they are born into, or over the prejudices they are raised with. It's our ability to put those prejudices **aside** when we are confronted with them that says who we are. It is this ability to change that reveals whether we are racist or not.

So, the actual question we should ask is, *How do we respond when confronted with having used language or actions that is nationalistic or bigoted?* Do we get up on high horse and defend our right to speak to hold our views of superiority? Do we mock those who call us on it? Do we brush aside the people who call our language and actions out *as if they are dogs?*² Or do we act like Jesus and listen? **The real miracle of this story in the Gospel of Matthew may be that Jesus listened.** When he is confronted by his own use of a racial slur by a woman who transformed it into a word that was not inflammatory, not dismissive, Jesus heard her... And he was amazed... And he changed his mind...

Can we do that, too? Is that a way we can be like Jesus?

In this story a **very human Jesus** came to see his own Jewish ethno-centrism for what it was—that in the language of J.B. Phillips—that "his God was too small." He may have believed

he was sent as a Jew to the Jews in order to call them to return to true faith in God. But it was this Gentile woman who helped him see that what God was doing as bigger than his limited understanding of his mission. So, Jesus stepped up. He changed his mind. In effect he says, *“You’re right. I was so caught up in my own stuff that I didn’t realize I was talking like a racist. Go with the grace and mercy of God. Go home. Your daughter is well.”*

This was the same human Jesus who had just called out the Scribes and Pharisees for their classism in seeing themselves as superior to people who didn’t have the leisure to practice their vision of purity laws. He certainly didn’t hesitate to declare their hypocrisy. What they were saying wasn’t just prejudice. ***It was everything that was wrong with a religion that prided itself on its own national identity as Children of Abraham*** at the expense of faith and trust in God.

What this human Jesus chose to do was act with gracism rather than racism. If he stayed the course and sent her away, then he would have been no better than the scribes and Pharisees whom he just excoriated for acting as if they were superior to other God-seekers. ***So, he changed his mind.*** He heard the cry of this person’s heart. Rather than trying to justify the *slur* she corrected, he chose to step up to the vision of God she had—a vision of God that could imagine that her daughter was deserving of the grace and mercy of God. ***That’s what Jesus learned from another person.*** And that’s why, if we want to live like Jesus, then there is hope for us as well. But that hope means that, like Jesus, we need to be willing to let **the miracle of listening** rather than defending our rights become our way of life.

I know that I am stepping on the toes of a 1,000 years of church teaching that says that Jesus is so divine, it’s not possible he could learn from someone else.³ But that kind of super-human, Superman view of Jesus is not the Jesus I find on the pages of scripture. The Jesus I find in the Gospels was a man who was tempted in all things like we humans are, but also was a savior who could change his mind. This is not the only story where Jesus stands amazed at what people believe he can do, where he honestly asks a question of others concerning what’s going on, or even a story depicting him as asking God to help him understand. YES. I believe that this is a story where Jesus changed his mind. He changed it ***because he listened. And we can too.*** That’s the miracle we are called to participate in: Listening rather than defending.

We need to remember that we are the spiritual heirs of this daring woman who believed that Jesus could be bigger than his upbringing. He was. And because of that, we can be bigger than our implicit racism and classism, too.

We buried John Lewis less than a month ago. He was one of the last great icons of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Can’t you still see that last picture we have of him in your mind’s eye as he stand with arms crossed, firm in his convictions, standing on those words “Black Lives Matter” emblazoned on a Washington DC street just north of Lafayette Square? Black-lives should matter every bit as much as white-lives matter—but they haven’t. Not yet. We know this is true. But people are listening now. As President Obama said at his funeral, “[We see it in] everybody doing the hard work of overcoming complacency, of overcoming our

own fears and our own prejudices, our own hatreds. We see it in people trying to be better, truer versions of ourselves.” John Lewis spent his life trying to teach us. The President said that Representative Lewis’ life teaches us that his way of pursuing this just cause is “where real courage comes from. Not from turning on each other, but by turning towards one another. Not by sowing hatred and division, but by spreading love and truth.”⁴

Whose lives matter? In the Gospel story we learn that all lives matter. But never in a way that lets that claim be reduced to the dismissive hypocrisy typical of the scribes and Pharisees. Our lives matter, Jesus teaches us when we listen for the hope of love, acceptance, and deliverance people look to us to express in what we say and do. Jesus changed who he was. If Jesus could do it, can we?

Amen?

Amen.

¹ This section on Jesus use of an ethnic slur is deeply shaped by David Hensen’s “Crumbs: Jesus and the Ethnic Slur” *Patheos* September 2, 2015.

² David Hensen’s words.

³ See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Vol. 4, Part 3, first Section

⁴ Obama Eulogy for John Lewis at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/us/obama-eulogy-john-lewis-full-transcript.html>