

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 16, 2020

Change Your Mindset

Scripture: Matthew 15:21-28

It is not at all unusual for us to hear someone refer to someone else, or a group, by a name or term that is less than complimentary. In fact, in our current culture, it has come to be the norm in some circles.

Indeed, it is so expected, that the Washington Post reported that as Joe Biden began the vetting process for his running mate, the first round of interviews included the question, "What do you think Donald Trump's nickname for you would be?" The article did not report any of the responses, but it should come as no surprise to us that within minutes of the announcement there was, indeed, a response from the White House that did, of course, include a new nickname.

Now, Donald Trump is one of the more obvious places where we hear less than complimentary nicknames or attributes ascribed to people. But the reality is that it's not the only place. Holiday dinners are almost famous for being the time when some relatives cringe and clench their teeth while other relatives spout off about their favorite group or person to denigrate.

And if we are really honest with ourselves, we often make assumptions about groups of people based on what we see or the circumstances in which they are presented to us on the news or elsewhere. We may or may not actually speak our thoughts out loud, but the likelihood is that we make assumptions about others and those assumptions are not always positive ones.

All of that is to bring us into today's gospel reading where none other than Jesus is heard making those kinds of comments to a woman, to a mother who is pleading with him to heal her very sick daughter. First, he ignored her. Then he essentially told her, "I didn't come to help people like you." When she persisted, he called her a dog, which in this case is likely a racial slur. What's going on here? How could Jesus possibly treat another person like that? He's the one who was always about inclusion. He put aside his own needs to heal people. He fed them when they were hungry. He spoke up for

those who were being treated unjustly. Was he having a bad day? Did Matthew get it wrong?

It's amazing to watch the acrobatics that some commentators use to try to explain this encounter. Some tell us that the word used for dog here was really puppy and that the woman could see the compassion and love in his eyes and knew it was a friendly light joke. Others see it as a test of faith. Others go to great pain to explain what a really tough time Jesus had been having and that he is to be forgiven for having a bad day. Still others suggest that his remarks were made so that his disciples would hear these words out loud and realize how terrible they were and would learn from them. Another goes to great length to explain that this woman who was from a race that had been conquered by the Jewish settlers when they came into the promised land, addressed him by the political terms and hopes of the Jewish people and did so in ways that even they had not yet started to do. Was this her way to express her faith, or simply a trick to try to get his attention?

After all of that reading and years of dealing with this story, and probably changing my mind and thoughts multiple times, I still don't have an answer, but let me tell you how I am hearing this right now. You see, I believe that the scripture is God's living word to us, speaking to us across time and space. So at times we hear and understand passages differently than we might have before, noticing a phrase that we never paid attention to before, or hearing something differently because of what we are going through and our need to hear a word from the Lord. That's one of the many things I love about the Bible. It is not just about long ago. It is God's living word speaking to us today right where we are.

There was a history of hatred between Jews and Canaanites. The Canaanite people had been conquered by the Jewish people when they took possession of the promised land. If I accept that Jesus was fully human, then I need to realize that he grew up in a culture that reflected this enmity and hatred between these two peoples.

At this point in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has left the normal territory of the Jewish people and has traveled into Gentile land, quite possibly to get a break from the crowds that were always following him. Here comes this woman following after him, calling out to him, wanting him to heal her daughter. She was not a Jew, not someone from his

culture or religion. She was not a Roman ruler who would have been considered his social and political superior. She was a Canaanite woman and Jesus ignored her.

It's easy to not like this story and Jesus doesn't come across looking good in it. But I have to believe that both Matthew and Mark included this story for a reason, and I think it was an important reason – one that I find hopeful and helpful especially today. You see, along with some biblical scholars, I think this was a turning point for Jesus. I think this was one of those “Aha!” moments that caught his attention and changed his mindset, his perspective.

In both Matthew and Mark, Jesus lets the woman know that he was sent to the people of Israel. I suspect that Jesus was still learning what God wanted from him. The world was so large, surely, at this point, God wanted him to focus only on the Jews. I think that when this woman, this desperate mother, persisted in seeking his help, he saw and recognized something that changed his viewpoint. I believe that he started to see both himself and her in a different way. On that day, I think she became the teacher, and he the student.

I find this important because I believe we are at a place in our country where we need to be willing to look at our assumptions, where we need to be willing to consider that things may not be the way we assume that they are. Let me try to explain.

When I was about 10, our family took a trip to Florida to see family. One morning, we stopped very early for breakfast at a restaurant that had not yet opened and on the door was a sign that said, “whites only”. My father had told me to expect this. What I didn't know to expect was that the woman who opened the door, welcomed us in, and served us our food was black. As a child, I remember that I didn't eat breakfast that morning. It didn't make sense to me that a woman who couldn't eat there because of her skin color, could work there and serve food to my family. It wasn't fair.

But soon, I was back in the north and I could forget about that experience, but not quite. During the civil rights marches I could agree that all people should have the same rights, and I could choose to believe that here in the north they did. But mostly, I could also believe that it didn't really affect me very much.

However, in more recent years I have come to see something different. I never really thought about the fact that I could go shopping and no one would look at me and

wonder if I was going to steal something. When I spent time with my friends, they looked a lot like me. When I turned on the tv, I saw people who looked like me. I never thought about the color of my skin. Some people had skin that was a different color than mine, but they were the ones who were different.

Today I understand that this is called “white privilege”. The fact that I can do these things, and that I typically don’t think about the color of my skin doesn’t make me good or bad – it is just my reality. It’s what I grew up with and it’s what society has always told me is normal. But then there are those “aha” moments, or those teaching moments, those times when I start to see things differently, those times when I have been learning to change my mindset and to say that this is not okay.

My younger self who believed that all people should have the same rights, has now come to understand on a very conscious level that walking into a store, or driving a car, or getting a job, or going for a jog in your neighborhood, or simply living your life and not having someone make assumptions about you because of the color of your skin is a right that everyone should have.

Last night, I read a Facebook post from a Black Pastor in our conference. He wrote, “Living while Black is a constant series of micro-calculations. Today, I went for my daily 5-9 mile run through the Amherst suburbs of my hometown, Buffalo. (The “safest” city in New York State...)

“I started in Amherst State Park and ended up in the immediately adjacent residential communities. I became nervous as some white people stared. I am not sure if it’s because I was “running while black” or because I have adapted to running in 85+ degree heat with my face covering for the run’s duration or because I’m just cute....

“Already I have grown quite used to avoiding (white) people as I pass them while running. I am usually the one who turns his head, crosses to the other side of the street, or moves off the sidewalk to the grass, or runs in the bike lane... Because I just don’t want to be accused of assault or being aggressive. And because coronavirus is still very real.

“I lament because running ... is one of the few practices that gives me unmitigated joy. And a piece of that joy was compromised today. .... Living while Black is a constant series of micro-calculations... for the sake of survival.”<sup>i</sup>

Jay is one of the gentlest men I know, and the reality with which he lives, breaks my heart. I read his words after I had written this sermon. This is only one of many small encounters that have helped change my mindset and understanding. I didn't really have a startling "aha" moment; but I believe I slowly started to wake up to this understanding and knowledge. Today the word "woke" is being used to mean being conscious of racial discrimination in society.

I think that that day when Jesus was confronted by the Canaanite woman, he had a moment that woke him up, that changed his mindset, that helped him see her in a different way, a way that moved him further along the road of understanding full inclusion in the kind of world that God wants us to live in. I take hope from this, because if I can believe that Jesus could understand and see things differently than he had, then he becomes a model for me as well.

Jesus' ministry became a ministry for all people and I'm really grateful for that, because we are not Jewish, we are Gentiles, we are the people who were considered the outsiders. For me, Jesus' life and ministry is a model for radical inclusivity, for loving all persons not just those who are like us. I'm grateful that this Canaanite mother was persistent and that she would not be ignored. If Jesus can change his mindset, his point of view, if he can grow in his understanding, then so can I. So can we.

It is a basic tenet of our faith that Jesus was both fully human and fully God. Now, that's a mystery that I don't really understand, but I am grateful that it is true. I am grateful that the one I call Lord and Savior, the one who I worship, the one who brings new life to us, was fully human and can understand when I don't see things exactly as God does, and when I need to be awakened.

Today, some people find it really hard to talk about racism; because in our culture, we have bought into the myth that we are either prejudiced or not, we experience racism or not, we are racist or not. One is good and one is bad, and we don't want to be considered bad, because we believe that we really are good people. But maybe, if we can see it as waking up, seeing something we haven't seen, looking at our lives and our experiences in new ways, then we can have better conversations and we can make a difference.

I think that this is not an either/or situation, but rather it is growing, and learning, and trusting and awakening, and acting, and sharing, and becoming. It is all of those verbs, all of those actions, that can and will make a difference if we are willing to take those first steps of asking God to help awaken us.

It is asking God to help us take little risks at first, of being willing to look at our ideas, our understandings, our actions even if doing so is scary. When those of us who have white skin start to discover that we can look at our lives and see where we have benefitted from the color of our skin, through no fault or action of our own, and realize that that doesn't make us either good or bad, we may become less scared of looking deeper.

We can begin to look at the ways we can make changes. We can begin to listen better to others and really listen to their stories. We can take more steps along the path that God is calling us to take. We can pray along with our opening song, "Wounded world that cries for healing, here we hold each other's pain, wounded systems bruised and bleeding bear the load, the scars of strain; dollars ration out compassion, hard decisions rule the day, Jesus of the healing Spirit, free us to another way!"<sup>iii</sup>

Let us pray:

Loving God, as Jesus was and is the healing spirit that comes into our lives, help us to be open to your movement within us. Where we have been sleeping and unaware of our actions, wake us up. Remind us that we are your children and that you love us just as we are, but that you always invite us and call us to become even more of the people you created us to be. You call us to be people who can and do love with a passion that is born from your love for us, people who seek justice for all of your children, people who are willing to change where we need to change and who grow where you invite us to grow. Thank you for sending Jesus to us to show us how we can change and grow in your way. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Jay Williams. Post on Facebook, shared by Rick McKinley.

<sup>ii</sup> Murray, Shirley Erena. "Wounded World that Cries for Healing" in The Faith We Sing # 2177