

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Unconscious Racism

Coleman McCarthy – the journalist and peace teacher – once asked his students to write an essay grappling with the question: “Why are we violent, but not illiterate?”

McCarthy holds-up the response of one student for both its depth of insight and *brevity*: The student wrote: “We are not illiterate because we are taught to read.”

“We are not illiterate because we are taught to read.”

It’s clear: everything in our culture – in our social worlds – operates on the presumption that a newborn will read and write and comprehend language... And by the time a child is a toddler – if they are not demonstrating the capacity for these skills – we bring in our experts from medicine, behavioral science, and education – to diagnose and remedy or accommodate the situation...

And lo and behold – by the time they are 15 yrs. old – the vast majority of Americans (over 90%) are – what is called: “functionally literate.”

McCarthy’s point, of course, was less about literacy rates but rather what might be the outcome if we lived in a society in which everything operated on the presumption that all our newborns – all people – would be *nonviolent*? If *every encounter* with our infants, toddlers, children, partners, spouses, friends, neighbors, ... with EVERYONE ... was rooted in the expectation of nonviolence? And if – early on – *someone didn’t demonstrate* a capacity for this skill... we’d bring in “resources” to work with them to remedy the situation. What if the presumption of nonviolence was “built-into” our family structure ... school system... political & economic systems... our “justice” system...

...What a world... (the Kin-dom of God...??)

This week as I’ve pondered our Gospel I’ve also been working with our Stewards of Justice + Peace on formulating our Parish Statement of Commitment to Anti-Racism... with the very helpful input of numbers of Parishioners... for which we are very grateful --Thank You! ...

McCarthy’s question kept coming into my mind in a revised form: “Why are we racist, but not illiterate?” The answer remains essentially the same... AND our growing awareness of the pervasive reality of “unconscious racism” has drawn our attention to the fact that, becoming anti-racist – requires “UN-LEARNING” a whole host of attitudes, beliefs and resulting behaviors – which are deeply embedded in our culture and social structure, and the language we so eagerly and “naturally” teach & learn.

It is toward *confronting this unconscious dimension* within each and all of us – and built-into the systems and structures in which we live — that efforts labeled ‘Anti-Racist’ are directed.... And we all recognize that *this is a daunting task*: how do we give-up something that we’re not aware we have? This requires real work... we need to get out of our comfort zone in order to see what makes us comfortable!

Our Gospel this week gives us a story that, I think, can be hugely helpful as we take-up this daunting task:

In our Gospel today, we find Jesus crossing boundaries of several kinds: regional, cultural, religious and moral – going to where *he* is a stranger, and doing what for many of us may seem to be strange things: we find him *ultimately* healing, yes; --- but also: ... *changing and growing along the way...*, *learning something about himself and also “unlearning.”*

To best understand this Gospel story, we need to remember that it follows a description of the great opposition Jesus was facing from the religious authorities in Jerusalem. Even though – maybe, *because* – Jesus was performing amazing miracles of healing, the religious leaders could only find fault with Him. Jesus clearly got frustrated with them – just a little earlier in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus calls them “hypocrites” and “blind guides.” Jesus decides to leave the city and head north, up to the region of Tyre and Sidon. These were cities in Phoenicia, territory that was primarily Gentile, not Jewish.

As he traveled through the area, a Canaanite woman sought him out. As many of us may know, the Canaanites, were a pagan people, with a long history of conflict with Israel. This woman, however, wasn’t concerned about those differences.

She clearly had heard something of Jesus and his reputation as a healer: she refers to him as “Lord” and “Heir” of David. How ever it was that she had come to know of him – now finding herself in a terrible personal crisis, she perceives that he, perhaps, *only* he... could help her. Consider: she is first of all a woman in this patriarchal society – apparently on her own ... ; her child is merely a daughter ... and even more, “demon-possessed”... dis-eased in a way that isolated them and made people afraid and assume that they had sinned... .. there really wasn’t a lower place to which she could fall. She quite literally has no place to go for help — except – *maybe* – this Jesus... ..

Notice: in this scene both Jesus and the woman are adrift in their lives...; rejected by the conventional societies from which they come ... both “outsiders...” both seeking understanding.

When they actually meet face-to-face, the woman cries out for pity, for mercy... for salvation... Her complete lack of inhibition, her willingness to defy the gender, ethnic and religious barriers between them surely spoke volumes. She is willing to throw *all propriety* to the winds... to humble herself publically, ... all for love for her child...

But what happens next is a surprise and makes us uncomfortable, doesn’t it? Jesus “gave her no word of response.” Complete silence. What was *he* thinking in that moment? She then badgers the disciples, hoping Jesus would listen to them. They do plead with him to deal with her ... to get rid of her. She had become an uncomfortable annoyance.

Jesus’ response is that his mission is “only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Simply put: he must tend to Jewish people – the “chosen ones” – his own people ... But, therein lies a problem: the governing leaders of the “chosen ones” are rejecting him and his message of justice and inclusion that challenges *their* systems and structures – their hierarchy of domination.

This foreign women, however – inspired by the great need of her child – instead of getting angry and leaving in a huff – kneels down before him, saying, simply: “Help me, Rabbi.”

We think: *surely* now Jesus will grant this woman’s request... She has moved from loud, insistent begging to a quiet posture of humility at his feet. How can he resist her? We aren’t prepared for his answer: “It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.” OUCH! Jesus uses a domestic metaphor: “The children” are, of course, the Jews, members of God’s covenant family. Jews referred to pagans as “dogs,” because of the contrast they saw between their own well-developed ethical system *rooted in The Law* versus the primitive idolatry of the pagan cultures.

People outside of God's covenant were to the Jews as dogs are to people... perhaps "domesticated," but still, in family life: the children must be fed before the pet dog. This was simply a matter of ...
priorities: just common sense.... OR: ... unconscious racism???

In the story, the woman doesn't contradict Jesus with "yes, but...". *She knows* how Jews view Canaanites. She simply takes what he says to her and out of desperate – unbounded – love for her child – *in humility*, points out, that in the scene Jesus himself has described, "scraps" fall from the table, and the "dogs" ... ever-present..., are happy to lap them up and be nourished by them.

What a moment of encounter! This Canaanite woman, this pagan outsider, has exhibited a faith in God's loving providence that even the Jerusalem elites failed to display.

In this moment *they* – Jesus and the woman – *and we* – discover that they have much in common... these two "strangers" meeting outside the bounds of conventional society! Both Jesus and the woman *live on behalf of others*: Jesus as prophet sent to save a people and the woman as mother... caring daily for someone in need.

This woman, in her need, her love for another, encounters Jesus as "Savior" – as "Messiah." Her faith and hope are *born of the Spirit* – not religious tradition or ethnic identity – brought forth through her daughter's suffering and their exclusion.

Jesus is astounded at her faith, her acknowledgment of him and who he is. She as an *outsider*, a Canaanite, a Greek, a Syro-Poenician... not a Jew, not a lost sheep... ... 'just' a woman who loves her child... a human being in need; *someone willing to humble herself to beg for another's healing and hope*.

She is like him ...

Now, Jesus not only responds to her – he praises her: using a title that acknowledges her dignity as a person; he speaks to her directly, with no hint of condescension: "*Woman*, you have great faith! Your wish will come to pass."

In that moment her hope and belief bursts into reality... She leaves this encounter with Jesus – and finds her daughter healed!

Jesus also moves on ... along the sea of Galilee, drawing large crowds and continuing to heal and feed those in need. He moves on, not just from the encounter and geographic place, but from the world *he thought he came for and belonged to*.

Jesus, sinless human person that he is, *moves away* from a culturally bound understanding of himself as called *only to the house of Israel*... now knowing that his mission of salvation is to *all* the peoples on earth... all the children of God... no boundaries; no conditions.

I think this story is critical to how we imagine Jesus: because if we imagine that Jesus never doubted, never questioned, never learned from anyone else or from the world around him, *never changed his mind*, then *that's* what we value and imitate! But: if we take this story at face-value, and accept that Jesus – fully human in all things but sin – *does listen, learn, and change and grow...*, *recognizes and lets go of his own cultural biases* – then *that* is the example we are to follow! AND: *None of this discredits Jesus, make him look weak, or diminishes his power; for as we all know: it takes enormous – godly – strength and integrity to admit, "You are right, I was wrong," and to act accordingly.*

Doesn't all this confirm what we're told in Luke's Gospel: "... *and, Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and all the people.*" (Luke 2:52)

Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite women calls us as individuals and as a Community of Disciples – to deeper belief and a change of heart and attitude. It means that we, too, individually, as church, as society... are to follow him across borders, into unknown territory; to become willing to be a stranger in someone else's world: to listen to those we'd rather dismiss, or who challenge us, or who make us uncomfortable.

We open ourselves to them, and we humble ourselves, confess and repent when we're wrong. And it means that we, too, *keep learning and – when necessary – "un-learning..."* and growing – for the rest of our lives – open to the ways God is stretching us and our mission to create the inclusive and just and healing kingdom of God here on earth as it is in heaven!

Amen!