

WESTMINSTER
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Changing Hearts and Minds

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Introduction

This morning we will experience together the great gift—and challenge—of preaching the lectionary. Sometimes you are handed a passage you would never pick yourself.

Long ago, when I was a camp counselor, we encouraged kids to challenge themselves by using a traffic light analogy.

Green meant “go.” It is smooth sailing. Green is comfortable and fun. But it’s a place that’s unlikely to bring about growth.

Now, red was a clear “stop.” We urged kids to let us know if they felt close to red because no one wanted to send a child home scarred for life from camp.

Yellow was most often the goal. Something that makes you hesitate. Feel some discomfort. But keep going anyway. That’s where growth happens.

This text today lands me, and may land you, into the yellow. It is not a comforting nor comfortable passage.

So, a little context to help us understand better.

Matthew’s Gospel was written to a community wrestling with who they were and who belonged. It is a deeply Jewish story: a Messiah who comes to save the lost sheep of Israel. And yet in the end, Jesus does not just send his disciples to all of Israel, but in what we now call the Great Commission, sends them to “all nations.”

Underlying the Gospel of Matthew is a community learning that God’s grace is bigger than the boundaries they had inherited.

And what we are about to read is the hinge point.

So, I encourage you to listen for what happens when a person we have learned to see as “other” insists on being seen. And listen for what happens when even Jesus is willing to be changed.

Before we get to it, will you please join me in prayer?

Prayer for Illumination

Holy God, open our hearts and minds to your Word.
Give us courage to listen for what we may not expect,
humility to be changed by what we hear, and grace to see
more clearly the people to whom you call us.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture

Matthew 15:21-28

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶ He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’^[a] table.”

²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it

be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that moment.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Changing Hearts

At the start of this passage, we find Jesus and his disciples crossing into Gentile territory. There’s no explanation for this, but we can assume that God is at work in this strange set up.

Now, just before this, Jesus had been in one of his many squabbles with the Pharisees. The religious leaders were upset seeing that Jesus’ disciples did not ritual purify their hands before eating. Jesus used it as a teaching opportunity, declaring to a gathered crowd, “It is not what goes into a mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth that defiles...” he goes on, “what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and that is what defiles.”

As so often happens in life, Jesus is immediately challenged to live what he has said.

We know this feeling.

You have just spent an hour in Bible study talking about patience, then some terrible driver has the audacity to go three miles under the speed limit in front of you the whole way home.

Or you have just told your kids that raising their voices won't get them what they want, only to find yourself, hours later, getting louder and louder with customer service.

It's OK. We all do this. We find ourselves talking the talk...but as for walking it? Well, we didn't mean have grace for *that* person, be patient when *that* happens, there are limits, you know.

If we're being ungracious, we might call this hypocrisy. And it is not a left-leaning or right-leaning or Christian or secular or men's or women's problem...it's simply a very human problem. But Jesus? Surely Jesus would not have this very human problem?

I will admit I struggle with what to do with this story of Jesus. As many have pointed out before me, if Jesus had had a PR person, we would not be reading this today. Because the straight-forward reading of this is that Jesus, sitting with his disciples, is met by a desperate woman. A Gentile, yes, but a human mother who is desperate for her child to be made well. And Jesus ignores her.

The disciples, less surprisingly, urge Jesus to just send her way. Her shouting is ruining the ambiance of their dinner. Jesus responds, maybe to her, maybe to his disciples, perhaps only to himself, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

But she persists. Even getting down on her knees, right in front of him, impossible to ignore. "Lord, help me."

If you didn't already hear the story, what would you assume happens? If I could give this a PR spin, I would skip to the end, maybe add some flourish. Jesus would lift her up, look her in the eye, "Great is your faith! Take heart, your daughter is made well." We would assume, living in a vastly different time and place, that this would be a non-issue for Jesus. Who cares that she is a Gentile?

Well, the short answer for this time and place, is everyone.

Jesus was following the script he had been given since birth.

Jesus was living within the story he had inherited: Israel's story, Israel's calling, Israel's Messiah. And that story had boundaries around who belonged. Those boundaries were not arbitrary. They were part of how Israel understood its identity, its calling, and its relationship with God.

But then this woman enters the story.

She does not care about the script. She won't follow her lines and stage directions. She usurps the whole scene.

When Jesus meets her with silence, she doesn't leave; she just moves closer.

Even when Jesus compares her to a dog, reminding her of her place in their world, she does not meet him with harsh words nor does she walk away. She disarms his harsh words, turning them into a clever play. She holds her ground, respectfully, refusing to let Jesus see her only as a Gentile. She insists on being seen as a person. Full stop.

It's like she snaps into focus. We get no details, but that's it. Jesus commends her great faith, and her daughter is healed.

It is odd to talk about Jesus like this. And preachers twist themselves into pretzels trying to explain away this interaction.

But why are we so very afraid of Jesus being truly, fully human?

Later, Matthew will tell us, as the cross loomed, how Jesus prayed for another path. How Jesus sweat blood in his very human stress. And yet, stopped the wrestling between his humanity and divinity by anchoring himself in God, “Not my will but yours be done.”

Is this so different?

Jesus in his humanity had a script given to him. He had an understanding of who he was, and what he was here to do. And this was not part of it.

Yet, Jesus, in his full divinity could not ignore a child of God. The illusion that this woman was not part of God’s redemption plan is broken when she in essence turned the other cheek to Christ himself.

Remarkable, Jesus remains. He allows her words to disrupt the boundaries he thought were necessary. And in the end, Jesus’ own vision of God’s Kingdom is expanded.

Perhaps, though, the hardest thing about this text is not that it challenges our perception of Christ, but that it compels us to follow him.

Because if we are to follow Jesus, we too will have times when our hearts and minds need to change. We, too, will have times when we need to throw out the scripts we were handed. We, too, will have times when we need to get out of our comfort bubbles and into the yellow of the world.

If even Jesus can change his mind, if even Jesus can open his heart wider, of course, we are called to do the same.

Changing Minds

Years ago, I heard an interview from On Being with a man named Derek Black that stuck with me. Derek grew up in a household committed to white supremacy. He was raised to believe that race was a biological reality, and that his race, the white race, was biologically, inherently superior to all others. His father was at one time the grand wizard of the KKK. And at least at the time of the interview, his father still ran a white supremacist website, one that Derek contributed to as a teenager.

Derek was being interviewed because he had publicly renounced white supremacy and was now studying the origins of race and racism as PhD candidate. How does that kind of change happen?

For Derek, it was one dinner at a time.

You see, when he went away to college, Derek continued to carry the script he was handed by his family and community. But it began to be challenged. First, the push back came from online forums of students who did not want an avowed white supremacist in their classrooms. This, generally, made Derek dig in more.

But then a surprising invitation came: A Jewish classmate, Matthew Stevenson, invited him to Shabbat dinner in his dorm room. This white supremacist sat down surrounded by Jewish peers, and they prayed, they talked, they listened to him, and they responded.

Something happened in that room that an argument on the internet could not accomplish. This group he had been taught

to think of as an abstract, inferior “other” were suddenly sitting around the table with him. They had names and stories and questions. They listened to him. They challenged him. They bested him. They became, in the most ordinary way, human beings he knew.

He kept returning. This “other” to him became friends. The script he had been handed began to fall apart. Not all at once, and not simply because someone won an argument. It happened through relationship, through listening, through the slow and difficult work of discovering that the people he had been taught to fear could no longer be reduced to an idea. For Derek, change happened one dinner at a time.

Why would Jesus and his disciples go have a meal in Gentile territory? Why would Matthew include such an unflattering portrayal of Jesus?

God is in the business of changing hearts and minds. And that requires going beyond where we are comfortable.

At summer camp, we intentionally challenged kids to into the yellow, to go up a little higher on the climbing wall, to speak up in a group even if their hand were shaking, to go down the rapids or into the cave, so they could practice feeling discomfort and keep going, keep growing.

The yellow is a Jewish student inviting a racist classmate to come and see who they really were.

The yellow is a young adult who has been taught all their life to fear and to stay away from people they learned were “other,” pulling up a chair to be, for the first time, in the minority.

The yellow is Jesus and his disciples going into Gentile territory.

The yellow is a mother standing toe to toe with the man she believes God has sent, not only for Israel, but for her. The yellow is the Son of God changing his mind.

And the yellow is Matthew including this story, seeking to change the hearts and minds of his community that they might follow Jesus, open their hearts, and “Make disciples of all nations.”

Practicing the Humility of Christ

Now, the danger in sharing a stark example like a white supremacist turned advocate against anti-Semitism, is that we might find ourselves saying something similar to the Pharisee in Luke, “Thank you, God, that I am not like *that*. Thank you, God, that I am not like those other people who need to change, who have biases, or who act hypocritically.”

I might begin to wonder how I can change hearts and minds to be more like me.

But that’s not the most pressing question to us as followers of Christ. As much as we might want to change the beliefs and behaviors of others, to follow even in the beautiful example of this Gentile woman, we are called to follow Jesus.

Humble Jesus. Who, as Paul writes, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, who emptied himself, becoming fully human, even to the point of death on the cross.

Just ahead of that, in the same passage in Philippians, Paul also says, be of the same mind as Christ.

We are not called to change hearts and minds to be like our own. We are called to seek for our own hearts and minds to be like Christ.

To be faithful and striving to do the will of God, yes. But also, to be humble and open to the Spirit challenging our assumptions.

Because the goal of discipleship is not to become people who have finally figured everything out. It is to become people who are continually changed by God.

So, church,
What is Gentile territory for you? Where do you assume you won't be welcome or that you'll simply be uncomfortable?
Who is the person whose story you have reduced to an idea?
Who's voice do you just not want to hear? Who is ruining the good vibes for you?

How might God change your heart and mind if you just stepped a little more into your yellow zone?

Friends, sometimes the most Christlike thing we can do is change. Lucky for us, God is in the business of changing hearts and minds. Even mine. And I hope, even yours.

Amen.



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