

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Fourth Presbyterian Church  
Rally Day/20th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
August 20, 2017

### **The Subversion of Religion**

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Matthew 15:21-28

Today is **Rally Day**.

Rally is a verb that means

“to come together again in order to continue a battle or an effort  
after a defeat or a dispersion.”

Or to Rally can mean “to recover in health, spirits, or poise.”

To Rally is to regroup, to reassemble, to re-form, to reunite.

Today at Fourth, Rally means that we are coming back together after our summer dispersion.  
We are regrouping as we prepare for a new church year.

**So why — on this day that we gather to shore up our life together —  
why would the preacher preach on the *subversion* of religion?**

Well, because Jesus has shown up at our Rally Day.

And so has this woman — this Canaanite woman.

And in their exchange

we are reminded why we are here in the first place.

---

This story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman is always disturbing.

Its jagged edges cannot be filed down by familiarity,  
but remain sharp with every new reading.

What is going on with Jesus here?

Is he suffering from compassion fatigue?

He’s just done so many deeds of mercy that he finally snaps?

Over the years, we’ve tried to explain away the sharp edges.

We’ve suggested that, perhaps, Jesus didn’t really mean what he said:

Either that the Greek term for dog was meant to be endearing,  
as in, Jesus called the woman “a little pup;”

Or that Jesus was speaking tongue-in-cheek

in order to goad the woman into expressing her faith.

But these explanations are more imposed upon the text rather than drawn from it.

And as Christians in the Reformed Tradition,  
we believe we should pay attention to the actual words of scripture.  
But the actual words can cause anxiety for us  
when the Jesus we encounter isn't the Jesus we expect.  
And when God's way of working in the world  
is messier than we want it to be,  
and pushes us in a direction we don't want to go.  
Like Jonah, last Sunday.

Back in 2006,  
the Keynote Speaker at the Montreat Youth Conference preached on this story  
of Jesus and the Canaanite woman.  
She went so far as to say out loud in her sermon  
that Jesus called this Canaanite woman a dog,  
which, of course, he did.  
Well, apparently this did not sit well with some of conference goers.  
Several wrote letters to this keynoter and to Montreat leadership,  
calling for this her to recant this claim that Jesus would be so insensitive,  
or to be replaced as keynoter,  
and even one that called for her to be stripped of her Presbyterian ordination  
for saying such a thing about Jesus.

Makes you wonder if they had ever read this story before?  
(By the way, if you want the full story some day,  
that keynote speaker was Jennifer Fouse Sheorn.)

---

So what is going on in this troubling exchange?

It's worth noting that in Jesus day  
there were no longer people who went by the designation of Canaanites, per se.  
This is a bit anachronistic on Matthew's part.

Matthew is making a theological claim about this woman,  
as well as an ethic claim, and a racial claim.

**The claim is that she does not belong to Israel—  
religiously, racially, ethnically, or nationally.  
She is an outsider.**

Calling her a Canaanite  
“stirs up memories of ancient foes — idol-worshipping enemies  
over against whom the people of Israel defined themselves”  
back in Old Testament times.<sup>1</sup>

Matthew may be playing with us here, setting us up,  
since his gospel opens by recounting Jesus' genealogy  
which includes — interestingly — several Canaanite women.

That's right, there are Gentile women in Jesus' family tree —  
Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth,  
play really important, positive roles in Jesus' family's story.  
These Canaanite women are blessed by God and become a blessing to others.

**So the question at play in the story  
is whether or not this woman has any claim on God's mercy?**

Jesus' initial reaction suggests that he cannot be bothered.  
At first, he tries simply to ignore her;  
and then, at the urging of the disciples, he tells her he has no time for her;  
and when she still refuses to go away, Jesus tries to get rid of her  
by throwing a little shade:  
*It is not fair, Jesus says,  
to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*

Still, the Canaanite woman will not be pushed aside,  
and her witty retort finally earns Jesus' respect:  
*"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."  
Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith!  
Let it be done for you as you wish."  
And her [demon possessed] daughter was healed instantly.*

---

So what are we to make of this story about Jesus?

Think of it this way: **We all are living under the influence.**  
We live under the influence of our inherited culture that has shaped us.  
We perceive the world through the lens of that inherited culture.  
But God's truth is broader, deeper, higher and more real  
than any of our inherited cultures.  
To imagine that any one culture perfectly perceives God  
would be to deny our foundational belief that we all are fallen creatures,  
all falling short of God's glory,  
not just as individuals, but as human cultures.

**One thing the Bible is clear about  
is that sin infects everything,  
and religious cultures and communities are no exception.**

The Jews of Jesus' day believed that their chosenness meant that God loved them  
more than non-Jews.

Some believed God's Messiah had come for Israel alone  
to the exclusion of other nations, other ethnicities, other races.

It was a Blood and Soil sense of entitlement.

Jesus words to the Canaanite woman simply express  
the sense of entitlement and exclusion  
that was common to his ethnic, religious, political culture.

We might say, he expresses the **implicit bias** of a 1st century Jew toward a Gentile.

The point here is not to figure out what Jesus really meant  
or whether he was in the wrong or was in on some sort of set up.

The point is that his knee-jerk response, wittingly or not,  
**represented the perspective of his inherited religion.**

And let's name it: it was a hateful perspective.

Now before we go all anti-Semitic,  
this story — for us today — is not about Jews or Judaism,  
but about **human tendency in all religion.**

It is human nature to exclude.

And particularly in the face of a threat,  
humans tend either to fight, or to flee, or to flock —  
as in, flock together with birds of a feather.

Jesus, at least in this moment, is settled into the *status quo*  
and has to be pushed out of his settledness  
and back into the *extremism* of the gospel of love  
he has been proclaiming.

This Canaanite woman, and the other Canaanite women in Matthew,  
serve to subvert Jesus' inherited culture,  
and reminds us of the sub-version of the tradition,  
the version of Israel's covenant that runs beneath these hateful expressions  
and says that God intends to bless the whole world.

Today's Isaiah reading comes from a time, just after the return of the exiles,  
when there was a great deal of racial and ethnic strife  
between the Jewish people and the others who also populated the land.

Yet Isaiah says,

*the **foreigners** who join themselves to the LORD...  
these I will bring to my holy mountain,  
and make them joyful in my house of prayer...  
for my house shall be called a house of prayer **for all peoples.**  
Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel,  
I will gather **others** to them besides those already gathered.*

This is nothing more than the original covenant with Abraham  
in which God said that through Abraham,  
*all the families of the earth will be blessed.*

And remember, my fellow Gentiles, WE are those families of the earth;  
WE were once the foreigners who have now been joined to the Lord.  
WE are joined, ingrafted into God's people.  
WE have received mercy that has nothing to do with blood or soil.

---

These are important things to say these days  
as we struggle to make sense of the tragic events  
last weekend in Charlottesville.

Now you might expect me,  
a Presbyterian preacher trained in mainline Presbyterian seminaries,  
to address these issues,  
since (I don't know?) you may think of me a some sort of liberal.

But don't just take it from me.

Take it from the many Evangelical leaders who have spoken out in recent days:

Take it from **Penny Nance**, President of the Evangelical group  
Concerned Women of America,  
who said that "this hateful, insidious ideology coming out of the KKK...  
the Neo-Nazis, these White Supremacist groups,  
is antithetical to Christianity."

Or from Pastor **James McDonald**,  
*former* member of the President's Evangelical Advisory Council, who said:  
"The greater your influence, the greater your complicity  
if you don't call the Charlottesville attack what it was—  
a heinous act of domestic terrorism, rooted in racial hatred."

Perhaps most helpful was the blog post of **Tim Keller**,  
Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York,  
part of the more conservative PCA denomination,  
who wrote to his "fellow Anglo-white Christians," saying,  
"First, Christians should look at the energized and emboldened white nationalism movement,  
and at its fascist slogans, and condemn it—full stop.

No, "But on the other hand."

"The main way most people are responding across the political spectrum  
is by saying, 'See? This is what I have been saying all along!  
This just proves my point.'

The conservatives are using the events to prove that liberal identity politics is wrong,  
and liberals are using it to prove that conservatism is inherently racist.

We should not do that."

"Second," Keller wrote, "this is a time to present the Bible's strong and clear teachings  
about the sin of racism and of the idolatry of blood and country—again, full stop."

And he draws on about 6 passages from the Old and New Testament to illustrate his point.

So when such ideologies raise their ugly heads in our midst,

Keller says the Christian community must speak up against them.

It is more than a little astonishing that we even have to make these points anymore —  
we whose relatives fought against the Nazis,  
like these names listed on bronze plaques in our sanctuary,  
and like my 94 year old great uncle who recently shared with me his story  
of driving a reconnaissance jeep across Germany in WWII.

But perhaps this storming of our country by the white supremacist movement will be just the thing we need for more moderate and thoughtful Christians **to see what we have in common in Christ, and to find value in working together.**

This is the value of being **moderately liberal** or **moderately conservative**.

And Fourth Pres has often be called a “moderating” church in Greenville.

**But we must also be vigilant in our moderation,  
lest it leave us sitting in complacency.**

In 1963, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

challenged white moderates in his his Letter from Birmingham Jail.

King wrote,

“I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.”

King said he wanted to push moderates out of their moderation and into extremism.

**“The question,” King wrote, “is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be? Will we be extremists for hate or for love?”**

Words for us to ponder once again in on this Rally Day in August of 2017.

So...

Was Jesus a moderate in this story? Or was he extremist?

And if he shifted,

did he shift from being and extreme exclusionary to being a moderate tolerator?

Or did he shift from being a moderate supporter of the status quo to being an extremist for inclusion?

There have been a lot of labels thrown about in this sermon, which frankly can be exhausting.

But there’s really no need to play with labels here, because there is no question the direction Jesus moved.

He recognized in himself the implicit bias taught to him by his culture.

**He moved away from hate and exclusion and self-protection toward love and inclusion and self-giving.**

This was the trajectory of his life,

and it was the **cause** of his crucifixion,

and it was the **vision** of humanity that God vindicated when God raised Jesus from the dead.

So let it be  
the trajectory of Christ's church today...  
...let it be our version of the Gospel...  
...if we would be faithful to our crucified and risen Lord.

<sup>1</sup> Iwan Russell-Jones, *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 356-360.