

The Encounter: When Justa Meets Jesus
Dialogue Sermon
The Canaanite/Syphronecian Woman
August 19, 2020

Phyllis: Matthew 15:21-28 (NRSV): 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' 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 instantly.

The Embrace

She is a woman. A foreigner. A pagan. Unclean.
He belongs to the chosen people.
She has means, independence, and a crackling intelligence.
He is an illegitimate, itinerant rabbi.
She has a daughter possessed by a demon. She needs him.
He is on a purposeful but limited mission.
She is everything he most despises and fears.
He's in for a major breakthrough.

Michele:

In her 2001 [Ideas at the Powerhouse](#) lecture, Dr. Elaine Wainwright, a feminist theologian at the University of Auckland, retells the story of the un-named Canaanite Woman. Pseudo-Clementine, an early Christian preacher, gives her the name, Justa, and her daughter the name, Berenice, in later writings in the third century.

Justa, the woman of Tyre whose granddaughter was now a member of their community recounts her encounter with Jesus when he was in her region at a particular time when her young daughter had been ill for so long that many thought that she must have been demon possessed.

This story in the Gospel of Matthew draws us in and makes us squirm. The boldness of the mother pleading for her daughter's healing. The courage of the woman entering a man's space. The disregard of the disciples. The ethnocentrism and contempt of Jesus. This account of the disciples and Jesus interrogates us--all of us--to consider what it means to be a person of faith. It interrogates us--asking us what preconceived notions we have about who is in and who is out, who God is and who God isn't.

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The early Christian tradition gave her the name Justa, the Just One. Justice comes to demand that the healing Jesus gives is inclusive of all peoples, regardless of who or whose they are.¹ For the rest of this sermon, Rev. Felton and I will refer to her as Justa. Simply calling her 'the Canaanite' furthers the racial slur that Jesus used and implicitly supports it. Calling her Justa reminds us that she was a particular person with a history, a family, a face.²

Matthew calls her a Canaanite, but there were no Canaanites in the time of Jesus. This is a racial slur like the ones that we use in the United States, words that alienate and degrade other human beings. The name Canaanite is puzzling because the Gospel of Mark refers to her as a person with Greek, Syro-Phoenician ancestry (Mark 7:26). Matthew gives her the title of Canaanite because of what that title symbolizes to his audience--it would remind the Jewish listeners of the ancient peoples of Canaan, the original inhabitants of the Promised Land. The Canaanites had their lands stolen from them. The formerly enslaved Hebrews who came from Egypt through the wilderness laid claim to it upon their arrival.

Justa is not a Canaanite, not by a long shot! In fact, she is from Tyre and Sidon. Matthew wanted us to think of Justa along the same lines as the Canaanites--a people unworthy of the promise of God, a people who stood in the way of God's will for the chosen people, just like she stands in the way of the disciples and Jesus in this chapter.

Phyllis: Justa was desperate and so she called out for help to this itinerant Jew who wandered into the area and who was being followed by such a close-knit group of women and men that he gave the appearance of being a holy one. **How taken aback was she when she received this insulting rebuff: It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.**

Justa's need, however, was greater than any humiliation she could receive and so, led by some power even beyond her own consciousness, she quipped back: "Ah, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table". In that moment, Justa silently acknowledged 2 realities, **her own fear at the realisation of what she had just said & her experience of a new power which she had not known before, a power which would never again allow her to be put down in such a way.**³

What is your experience when truth speaks to power?

¹ Pseudo-Clementine, an early Christian writer, gives her the name Justa and her daughter the name Berenice in later Christian writings in the third century. See Pseudo-Clementine, *Homilies* . 2.19, 3.73, 4.1.

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³In the '50's & '60's, the members of the African American community also experienced similar epiphanies... 'to stand up/speak out for their humanness & civil rights, it was fear invoked. Yet, to speak and act out this reality, was also Light & Truth not to be hidden under a bushel or buried underground; rather a proclamation that would set a country free! Black Lives Matter, the mantra of the 21st Century, which stretches across geographical and ethnic borders is a similar call to action, a movement toward justice and freedom.

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Jesus whose birth and life story generally placed him among the colonised of the Roman Empire, preaching a message that was counter-Imperial, is placed in this story in the role of the coloniser. He stands with and for ancient Israel as this story evokes that of another conquest of land, namely ancient Israel's violent appropriation of the land of the Canaanites on the grounds of its being promised as divine gift. This is a story which has been used to support many land grabs especially among Christians.

Justa remembered also the look of astonishment, recognition and even shame that passed across the face of the Jewish holy man whom she later came to know as Jesus. Jesus spontaneously held out his hand to her in welcome, drawing her up from her position of supplication, and acclaimed her: Woman, great is your faith. "Let it be done for you as you desire", so as to highlight his recognition of what Justa had taught him; a recognition that linked her insight into wholeness with that of God whose way, whose dream, Jesus was to establish on earth.

And now, a woman from this Gentile community that siphons the resources of Galilee for their own benefit wants even more? Justa wants what Jesus freely gave the chapter beforehand in Gennesareth to crowds of people, a town on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Suddenly, the disciples and Jesus want nothing to do with healing when the request comes from a woman like this although his power freely flowed days ago. The slur of 'Canaanite' places Justa in the excluded rather than included category--it places her and her daughter in the same category of the barbaric non-Hebrew people who inhabited this land before the Hebrews arrived to claim it--making her an outsider in her own community, in her own land.⁴

First Invitation (The Lamentation of Justa): The text does not tell us from whence she comes--she simply shows up and starts shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by demons." She refuses to be silent about her need. Justa is willing to rely on an itinerant, backwater rabbi to heal her daughter because her desire for justice is so great and her love for her daughter is so strong.

First Refusal (The Silence of Jesus): Jesus refuses her by straight up ignoring her cries for mercy and healing. The next line is heavy with its failures: "But he did not answer her at all."

Questions: Have you cried out because of injustice and been ignored? Or have you been the disciples ignoring the person calling out for mercy?

Second Refusal (The Discomfort of the Disciples): The disciples are distressed by Justa's very presence and the volume of her shouts for mercy and healing. Rather than comfort Justa or bring her to Jesus, the disciples come directly to Jesus to ask him to send her away because she keeps shouting after them.

⁴ Dr. Elaine Wainwright, "Mother Pleads for Her Daughter -- Matthew 15:21-28, July 31, 2020. Accessed August 11, 2020. <https://hail.to/tui-motu-interislands-magazine/publication/430InQe/article/uoiUxow>

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Third Refusal (The Ethnocentrism of Jesus): Jesus refuses her by telling the disciples that he was only sent for descendents of Israel. Jesus tells them, “I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel.” I interpret this as a reassurance to them that Jesus will maintain the patriarchal promises that they want him to uphold. He will not step out of line and will honor all the chosen people, the ‘lost sheep’ of Israel, which cannot include Justa, an alien, a stranger.

Questions: Has someone ever refused to acknowledge you but tells you no indirectly through other people? Have you ever experienced discrimination like this?

Second Invitation (The Humility of Justa): She ignores the disciples, who I imagine blocked her way to Jesus, and she uses her body as an instrument of interrogation. She kneels before Jesus, forcing him to recognize her. *He will not ignore her again.* Her shouts did not work, so perhaps kneeling might this time. This time, she presents herself in a humble position, hoping this will convince him to have mercy and heal her daughter. She calls him Lord again and says, “Help me.”

The Jesus we meet in this pericope makes us uneasy. We are accustomed to & prefer the ‘meek & mild, humble & gracious’ holy one. His words, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs’ are a reflection of his cultural and religious DNA.

The ‘rub’ is not the name calling but rather that the gospel writer chooses to give voice to the ‘teachable moment’ through the ‘seeking woman’ and not Jesus. I do not know how God thinks, but I do know that the Divine chooses the ‘truthsayer’ to make a point for us who are imprisoned by our ignorance. This coupled with Jesus’ response to Justa’s insight encourages me to believe that Jesus, the Redeemer’ saw and realized the justice of her insight, opened his heart to hers (breakthrough), and acted on the truth spoken!

Jesus the Human One, was human enough to have his Jewish male privilege with all its racism, pierced by the plight of a poor and desperate woman who came from an enemy people. The glory is that Jesus, despite his privilege, was still able to be merciful; able to choose the way of God— and that he did. The glory is that when he understood what he had done, and how he had behaved, **he changed instantly**, and healed the daughter of the woman; he fed Justa, just as he had fed his Jewish sisters and brothers. And perhaps that’s the most confronting and scary thing of all about this story, for us. **Because what it means is that we have to change if we are going to worship Jesus with our hearts instead of only our lips, or we will be keeping our hearts far from him, and from his way.**

Michele: Third Refusal (The Prejudice of Jesus): Jesus does not want to help Justa. He tells her, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Jesus refers to the Jews as the children and the people of Tyre and Sidon as the dogs in this clearly racialised insult. Jesus does not want to offer any of his healing authority or mercy to Justa’s daughter. He has come for Israel, and Israel only.

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Questions: What do we do when we are put up against the resistance of the power structures around us? Do we give up or do we keep pushing? What happens when the truth comes to us in a form we don't want to accept or acknowledge? Do we hold on to our belovedness when the powers around us tell us that we are so worthless we don't even deserve direct acknowledgement?

Third Invitation (The Cleverness of Justa): Justa rejects his refusal after she cries out to him for help a second time. She has made her way through a group of people large enough that she must shout to receive the attention of Jesus. Justa has made it past the disciples who refuse to speak with her. She will not go away empty handed. She will take even the crumbs today. And so she says, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." She takes his insult and turns it back on him, reclaiming the language for herself.

Final Transformation (The Healing of Jesus and Justa): Justa refuses to receive the insult. She has come this far by faith and her faith will not fail her yet. Justa leans on the holy word--the word that she is beloved by God, that the healing power of God is for everyone, including her daughter and herself. Jesus is perplexed by Justa. And yet, he declares to her-- "Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." Justa had to prove herself, over and over, in this story, to accomplish her goal. She had to find out where Jesus was staying, make her way through the area, shout for him while he ignored her, pass by his followers who also ignored her and asked Jesus to deal with Justa because they wouldn't. She got down on her hands and knees in front of a backwater preacher, asking for his help. He insulted her now---the very first words he says to her, in fact, are full of racist undertones. And she uses his words to disarm him. She takes the power away from the pain he wants to inflict, and instead receives incredulous power--he hears and receives her. He declares her faithful. He heals her daughter.

Questions: So I ask you, what is the cost of dialogue about our differences? What are we willing to risk?

Phyllis: When you hear the 'truth' from a source outside your circle of knowing, do you 'taste & see' or reject the truth because you can't abide the source? Or do you reject the truth because you don't like the light the truth cast on you?

Justa is indeed for us the foremother of the mission which includes us as Gentiles. Just as she won healing and wholeness for her daughter, she too won it for us, her daughters and sons today. While she does not have a name in our story, she does, however, have a voice. She addresses Jesus as 'Kyrios' and as 'Son of David' and she cries out in the language of prayer and liturgy: 'have mercy on me' and 'help me.'

Indeed, for us, her voice echoes the voice of the women of our community who participate in the liturgical life of the community and in our theological reflection.

They are women of faith, maybe not members of our churches, crying out for justice. They gather on the street corners where their children have been slaughtered by police or

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gun violence. They march on the streets with their partners, husbands and children, with placards announcing to the world, our LIVES MATTER. They stand before city & federal government councils seeking public safety; reform for our urban centers; public health strategies that prevent the spread of Covid-19; they march for food security and just division of educational resources and better schools. They, like Justa, want the healing for all children and every community ... not scraps or crumbs but a healthy distribution of justice, healing, and power.

Justa came seeking 'health and wholeness' (reconciliation) for her child and in doing so, opened the door to Gentiles, the disenfranchised, the disinherited, the despised and justice for all. Not in the sweet bye & bye, but right now?

What are you seeking? A non-threatening rhetoric, feel good music, or do you want to be healed knowing that healing includes righteousness, confrontation, discipline, truth, light, and letting go of even an equitable sharing of economic and social control?

Michele: Justa does not ask to lose her particularity. She will always be a Gentile woman from Tyre. She does not ask to become one of the chosen people. She does not ask Jesus to bless her and ensure she will be one of the sheep found. She asks for healing for her daughter. Justa interrogates us with her pleas for mercy and healing. She does not sit idly by without getting the results that she needs.

Justa is with us. She is the mother shouting for her daughter's healing, pushing her way, kneeling her way, witting her way to the feet of Jesus. She is the Black student in front of the Baltimore City Public Schools during a Black Lives Matter rally, dancing out her manifesto for justice. She is the doctor in a community health clinic advocating for her Spanish-speaking patients. Justa is any woman anywhere persisting her way to the front of the line to demand healing and wholeness for the people she loves.

Justa may live inside of you. She may live next to you. And she will never leave you.