



SAINT LUKE'S

“CONVERSION”

THE 11TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
YEAR A

ISAIAH 56:1,6-8

PSALM 67

ROMANS 11:1-2A,29-32

MATTHEW 15:10-28

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

AUGUST 20, 2017

It is easy to lose sight of the Jewishness of Jesus. Today we see Jesus responding at first very clearly from a Jewish perspective. For a faithful Jew, the world is divided into Jews and non-Jews or Gentiles. When I was a child, I remember thinking that the Gentiles were another ancient tribe, like the Hittites or the Amorites. But then a Sunday School teacher explained that we are Gentiles. They are us. A light went on when I realized that in fact what we thought of as a universal religion, a gift from God to everyone, was not originally written or intended that way at all. The Hebrew Scriptures were not the “Old Testament”, they were books written by the Hebrew peoples for the Hebrew peoples, setting out rules for faithful living. Which makes today’s story even more important. In the instant that Jesus’ understanding is transformed by the Gentile woman, the history of the world changes too. This is the seed which propels the Jesus movement from a reformation within Judaism to a new relationship with God through Christ for all people.

Today, Jesus is on a learning curve. We see the full humanity of Jesus in his exhausted replies to the Canaanite woman. The needs of the people never turn off or go away. All of us know that feeling: we can only do so much. It is what leads us often to circle the wagons and focus on the needs of our immediate family and friends. Jesus too can only do so much and as a faithful Jew he is clear about the boundaries of his obligation and mission: it is to the house of Israel. In fact, Jesus defines the scope of his mission more narrowly than that: the “lost sheep” of the house of Israel. Which means, those to need rounding up, bringing back to the fold of true faithfulness – again pointing to Jesus’ understanding that his mission is to reform Judaism from within.

And then this woman who keeps coming. (A woman whose name we never learn). This foreign woman comes from Tyre and Sidon, which were towns known for Baal worship. For a Jew, contact with her is a clear issue of defilement. A Jewish commentary on the New Testament¹ helpfully draws attention to the woman “coming out” to meet Jesus. Implying the woman comes to meet Jesus at the border of the region. We don’t know if Jesus actually crosses over into that district of Tyre and Sidon. This is an issue that matters to a faithful Jew. It matters if you cross over into ritually unclean places. This woman persists in asking for healing for her daughter. Like many seek healing and justice, she is given little encouragement by the one who has the power to give it. This is a Jesus we do not see very often: withholding, pushing away, risk averse. Like us, Jesus resists painful change; he pushes hardest that which he is closest to accepting. In the end, Jesus is moved not by a theological argument about what God’s call is, but by her purity of heart and faith.

Great is your faith. What is the woman’s faith? Surely it is not only her belief that Jesus can heal but her willingness to keep asking and seeking. It is faith plus persistence. If she hadn’t kept asking, her faith wouldn’t have done her much good. *Great is your faith.* Jesus is converted. The story of God and humanity shifts on its axis in this moment. God’s movement is always outward and towards inclusion. Can you think of one instance in the gospels where God works the other way around, drawing the circle narrower; asking us to become more exclusive? God’s movement is towards welcoming strangers in.

¹The Jewish Annotated New Testament (publ. Oxford)

This is not easy for us. It never has been. We all need help recognizing God's image in those who are so different. St. Paul and St. Peter both have their own threshold moments, when their eyes are opened to the fullness of God's vision and mercy.

How do we take this learning from Jesus' own life and apply it to Charlottesville and the 1000s of places where we have differences that are not quickly resolved by tearing down a statue or replacing one flag with another? Please do not misunderstand me here - I am not suggesting that the legacy of slavery and racism and white privilege is anything but devastating. I am asking: how do we do justice and raise up the victims without returning evil for evil and perpetuating cycles of marginalization and hatred?

I ask this because in embracing us who are Gentiles, Jesus does not condemn his own people. Jesus does not throw the Hebrews to the margins as he raises up the Gentiles. The Pharisees and the Sadducees are all welcome if their hearts are as open as the Canaanite woman's heart.² Some Gentiles and some Hebrews are zealots for one cause only. Some Christians still want Jesus to be more exclusive than he is. Jesus makes room for everyone at God's Table. However, there is one threshold we have to cross as we enter the Jesus' community. We have to be willing to love our neighbor - which is not so much about how we feel but how we act - we have to be willing to treat our neighbor - in a loving way. Hateful behavior is not welcome at the Table. We don't get to choose who our neighbor is, or who we sit next to. There are no enclaves of privilege in the Kingdom of God. We have to treat our

²Cf John 3:1: Nicodemus the Pharisee becomes a follower of Jesus; Jesus interacts frequently with Pharisees, including socially in their houses eg. Luke 7:36f; Luke 14:1

neighbor as we would wish to be treated. *Love your neighbor as yourself* is a supremely demanding commandment, and so some will self-select out.

The challenge of following Jesus today is as it has always been: to love our neighbor. Our daily discipleship consists in growing in love of all the neighbors God gives us, with God's help.

AMEN

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