

“Listen Up!”

September 26, 2021

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Matthew 15:21-28

Last Sunday I started a series of sermons exploring how we might talk with people with whom we disagree, exploring the possibilities that arise in some of the stories of Jesus interacting with his opponents. As I said, no single method is fitting for every situation. But from these stories we might develop a repertoire of skills.

Last Sunday we considered silence.

Today we hear a story about both the difficulty and the importance of listening.

Now, as I started reflecting on conflict and conversation, it occurred to me that you don't want to get into an argument with two different kinds of people—at least two.

The first are those who are so convinced they are right that nothing will change their mind—*nothing!* There are some religious people like that—on both the left and the right. And there are some politically minded people like that—on both the left and the right. You probably know some people like this. Adherents of conspiracy theories are especially problematic in that they are skilled at turning any evidence contrary to their opinion into *proof* that their opinion is correct.

Avoid them—or *rather*, avoid *arguing* with them. You will get nowhere.

You might also want to avoid people who are so good at making their argument that they win every time! That's never any fun! I'm joking here.

But Jesus might have been thinking this about half-way through his encounter with that unnamed Canaanite woman.

This is a troubling story. Through it we might learn the importance of listening to someone we don't want to listen to so that we might hear something we don't want to hear. We watch as Jesus walks down the difficult path of growth that is listening.

Rembrandt made a simple drawing of this scene. Jesus walks along the road, wrapped up in conversation with his disciples. The Canaanite woman approaches the group but is noticed by only one disciple who obviously wasn't keeping up with the conversation.

Jesus? In Rembrandt's drawing, he doesn't notice the woman. Matthew tells us, “He did not answer her at all.” A desperate woman pleads with Jesus for his mercy and Jesus doesn't even turn to look at her.

We're left wondering: why can't Jesus be a little more "Christian" in his actions? Had he forgotten about the time he told others: "Blessed are those who show mercy" and "There must be no limit to your goodness?"

Or why can't Jesus be a little more "Jewish" in his actions? Certainly, he knew of God's Way—the *Torah* given to Moses: to care for the poor and the alien, to love your neighbor as yourself. The Hebrew people were called to think about others, even the strangers in their midst, and to connect imaginatively with their situation and act accordingly.

But that is not happening, is it?

Maybe Jesus was just having a bad day—as any of us can have. We know that we should love our neighbors, but too often we can be self-centered and cranky and short with others.

When this woman first confronts Jesus, he responds in silence. And while I spoke last Sunday of the value of silence at times, this is not what I had in mind. We expect something more, we hope for something more. And Jesus disappoints us.

The silence of Jesus, however, is not enough to silence this woman.

Look again as this woman comes near to Jesus.

She keeps shouting. And the disciples—never good role models themselves—the disciples start to get annoyed. Listen to them. They are bothered by both this woman *and* Jesus. "Send her away," they say to Jesus—meaning: "Do what she wants so that she'll leave us alone." The followers of Jesus are no more interested in *listening* to this woman than Jesus seems to be.

Finally, in response to the shouting of this woman and the complaining of these disciples, Jesus turns toward her.

Perhaps now Jesus will do what we think Jesus should do.

Instead he puts up a wall of exclusivity: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," Jesus says to this Canaanite woman.

Is it forgetfulness that makes Jesus unwilling or unable to listen?

Did he not remember God speaking through the great prophet Isaiah: "Maintain justice and do what is right...The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord...I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; I will gather others besides those already gathered"?

God's Way, as Moses makes clear, is a Way of great inclusive love—it begins with one's own people and then extends far beyond any one nation or group of people. God's Way for us is a love that will gather in even those that many would seek to keep out.

At the beginning of this Gospel, Matthew takes the time to point out that Jesus' ancestors were not just those of the "house of Israel." At least three of his ancestors were Canaanite women—Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. But Jesus wants nothing to do with this branch of his family tree. Today it seems that those on the outside will just have to wait.

Shouting gives way to begging as this woman kneels before Jesus and simply says: “Lord, help me.” You are listening carefully enough to hear the desperation. You probably know what it’s like to pray like this. Certainly Jesus will show some compassion now.

And once more Jesus responds—not as we would expect him to, not as we would like him to, not even as we would like to think *we* would respond. “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

To the injury of no compassion, Jesus adds the insult of a racial slur.

He doesn’t listen and his speech stings.

Three strikes and you’re out. Game over. That’s all folks.

Unless...

Unless you’re willing to match wits with Jesus, asking until you receive.

Unless you’re willing to persevere in seeking until you find.

Unless you’re willing to wrestle with this reluctant Jesus, knocking on the door of his heart until it opens.

“Ah, but Lord,” she replies—“even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” Call her a dog if he must. Just give her the healing that she seeks. God’s love is not limited to the favorites only. The gospel message—the *good news* is not for one group alone.

The New Testament scholar, Sharon Ringe, tells us: “For the sake of her daughter the woman broke all custom and approached Jesus, went after what she needed, and bested him in argument.

“Whatever led to Jesus’ original responses—perhaps his own unavoidable participation in the racism and sexism of his time—this Gentile woman calls his bluff. Her wit, her sharp retort was her *gift* to Jesus—a gift that opened his ministry beyond those people who were like him. Her gift was not submission or obedience but a gift of sharp insight and courage.ⁱ

We can imagine that the early Christians must have had as difficult time with this story as we do. To their credit and to our benefit, they kept this troubling account and tried to make the best of it. Perhaps better than anywhere else we see in this story a very human Jesus who is capable of repentance—of turning in a new direction.

And if this Jesus, this cranky, over-burdened, tired, human Jesus, can ultimately listen to and hear someone else—well, may we can too. In faith we affirm that Jesus, having known this human condition is able to help us in our own weakness and weariness, that we too might be able to listen to and connect imaginatively with others—even when we would rather not.

When confronted with someone different from himself, with different experiences and a different perspective, Jesus was ultimately able to listen in a way that let his world view be altered. He let his fear of an outsider be transformed by his encounter with another human being. He opened himself to the possibility of becoming a different person. He let himself be changed and did

something different because someone else had touched him even if only through a small hole in his wall of defenses.

While we can't always expect to act like Jesus, maybe at times we *can* go and do likewise. We can listen to those whom we would rather ignore. We can turn and face the people from whom we would rather walk away. We can recognize that God is doing a new thing among and through people who are outsiders—outside the church, outside our small circles, with different experiences and different thoughts.

And we can use this story to remind us that God's ways are not our ways, God's thoughts are not our thoughts. If we have lost the ability to be surprised or puzzled or shocked by what Jesus does and says, we have most likely remade Jesus in our own image and are no longer seeing or hearing the one who came announcing the good news of God's love for all people.

ⁱ Sharon Ringe, *Feminist Interpretation of Scripture*