

SERMON FOR SEPTEMBER 10, 2017

Jesus was a teacher. No matter where he was, or whom he was with, he taught. He stood in the middle of crowds and taught love and forgiveness,. He huddled with his disciples and taught dying and rising. He faced the Pharisees and taught the primacy of grace over rules, compassion over obedience. He touched the broken and taught that love heals. He valued women and children and taught we are all worthy. He told stories and parables so we could catch the truth. Jesus was a teacher.

You know, giants in the field of education and Christian education, faith formation if you will, affirm that good teachers are also good learners. Teachers learn from the process of teaching and from their pupils. Good teachers are most often learners who welcome wisdom, no matter where that wisdom comes from. They are energized by knowing and becoming. Most teachers are learners who are growing with the transformation of their minds.

Strangely, we do not see Jesus' learning side very often. One of the clearest learning encounters that Jesus has is with the Canaanite woman who comes asking him to heal her daughter. To tell the truth, Jesus does not look really good in this meeting, as pagan meets faithful Jew, as a terrified mother meets a confident man, as need and despair meet the messenger of hope. Rather than reach across the divides of religion and culture, Jesus builds a wall of impossibility that separates him from the Canaanite woman.

Of course, there are well-known reasons for Jesus' reaction. The Canaanites and the Jews were enemies who threatened one another culturally and religiously. A Jew would consider a pagan unclean, anathema to the holiness codes that governed Jewish religious life. Jews avoided what the religious laws said would make them dirty, sick people, broken people, their own women, and people who worshipped other gods. The Law of Moses delineated who was in and who was out. That Jesus was in and the Canaanite woman was out was common sense in Jesus' day.

Jesus had lots of reasons for walking away from the woman who was begging for her daughter's healing. After all, turning his back on the sick girl and her mother was maintaining the status quo.

But maintaining the status quo is not what we have come to expect from Jesus. We expect "love your enemy." We expect "Love your neighbour as yourself." We expect "Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened. Ask and you will receive." Well, the Canaanite woman sought, knocked, and asked, and Jesus built the wall. "I came for the lost sheep of Israel. Helping you is like feeding their food to the dogs." Nasty.

Nevertheless, she persisted. She persisted for the sake of her child, hoping that they might be offered crumbs of compassion that would be enough to heal. In her persistence, she became Jesus' teacher, setting his bounded vision of what is required against her hope. She forced Jesus to reassess his position, to

reevaluate what might happen if he traded the safe for the possible, the reasonable for the compassionate, his status quo for the common good. She was Jesus' teacher, and, to his credit, he chose to learn.

If Jesus learned from the Canaanite woman, what are we to learn from the story of the two?

Well, to begin with, if Jesus found he had things to learn, we probably all do. Seeing ourselves as learners is no easy task. The world we live in wants competency. It wants us graduated, finished growing and ready to take charge. Answers are what we offer. Certainty is an asset. Problems solved is the goal. It is so easy to drift toward what seems sure and doable. It is easy to stick with what we know, what brings a measure of safety—a kind of intellectual solid ground.

These statements describe Jesus' situation as he meets the Canaanite woman. He had familiar rules that showed him the way to relate. And the rules were supported by the synagogue. The rules, however, did not bring compassion to light. Jesus had a problem, and if he couldn't show love, he was the problem.

Jesus had a decision to make. He had a big truth to learn and that truth was that God is not too interested in boundaries that keep out love and wholeness. Holy energy does not peter out when there is difference. Love does not give us permission to turn that our backs on need. Jesus had a decision to

make, a problem to solve. And in the end, his decision was to heal with compassion. Jesus learned something that day.

There is a familiar Buddhist saying, “When we are ready to learn, a teacher will appear.” We need to keep an eye out for the one who is our teacher. Teachers come in all shapes and sizes. They can be children or elders. They can speak through art or literature or the news. They can challenge or support. They can demand or awaken. When we are ready to learn, a teacher will appear. I wonder if Jesus were surprised that a Canaanite woman taught him that his compassion boundaries needed to be wider. Who has been a recent teacher for you? The answer to that question might be a surprise of the same making.

The image of Jesus as learner gives us one more spiritual path to follow on our faith journey. Learning draws us into growth. Learning helps us become. It unlocks our potential. It gives us new horizons. It opens worlds of wonder and it connects us to the creator, the dreamer, the wisdom we call God.