

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

August 16, 2020, The 11th Sunday of Pentecost / The 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 133, Matthew 15: 21-28



If your religion doesn't challenge you to care for people you might otherwise be dismissive of and, instead, reinforces your negative feeling about them, you don't have a religion—you have a formalized structure for institutionalizing your biases.

—Rev. Mark Sandlin

You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that

God hates all the same people you do.

--Anne Lamott

CHANGES

It is really surprising that this morning's story in Matthew's gospel survived. It is not a story that shows the Jesus in a very good light. Not to mention the disciples.

Where is the compassion?

Where is the desire to bring healing?

Where is the striving to show the love of God?

Where is the Jesus we are used to learning about?

Jesus has entered a non-Jewish region northwest of the Sea of Galilee. Not surprisingly the word of his healing people has spread throughout the region, so a Canaanite woman begins to follow him. She is shouting to him to come and save her daughter, who is ill.

She is so persistent in her shouting that the disciples ask Jesus to just send her away because all her screaming is bothering them.

And Jesus says what seems to be the most appalling thing. "I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel," he tells her. "God has not sent me to you and your people. If I helped you and your daughter, it would be like taking food from the mouths of the children of God, and throwing it to the ground so dogs can eat it.

You are no better than a dog, trying to steal food that is not yours."

And as if this wasn't enough, Jesus was using a racial slur that was common during his day. It's like Jesus is using the "N" word talking to this woman. Jews often referred to Gentiles as dogs, and you don't need this history lesson to know that this truly was an insult.

We are seeing and hearing Jesus speak and act like anyone would from the culture that raised him. But we don't expect that of Jesus, do we?

Pilch, John J., *the Cultural World of Jesus, Cycle A*,
Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995, pp. 124-26.

What does it mean that Jesus uses a common racial slur in the face of this woman asking for help?

What would prompt him to say no to this mother who longs for her daughter to be well?
 Why in the world is this story in Matthew's gospel?
 How can we find Good News in this story, when Jesus is so hard to recognize?

As I wrestled with this story during the week, I was reminded of a movie in which someone's surprising words brought great change. I told you this story many years ago, and some stories deserve retelling. The movie is entitled: "*Music Within.*" (2007) Our Friday night movie group watched it last year.

And let me warn you that if you go looking for it, it is rated R because it has, shall we say, a very realistic use of language.

It is the true story of Richard Pimentel. He is the author and advocate for employers hiring people with disabilities. When the "Americans with Disabilities Act" was passed in 1990, Pimentel was very instrumental in its being written and then passing.

He initially became interested in the ways those with disabilities were treated because of his own experiences.

Richard Pimentel was a Vietnam Veteran who lost most of his hearing when the bunker he was in was bombed.

He could no longer hear the upper registers of sound.

This meant that he could hear vowel sounds,
 but not the consonants at the beginning and end of words.

He also had tinnitus, which was a constant high-pitched ringing sound in his ears.
 So, he learned how to read lips.

The army rehab officer Richard went to, to have papers signed so he could re-enter college on the G.I. Bill, so no. He told Richard he wouldn't approve his university education because not only was he deaf, but he was worse than deaf. The rehab officer told him he would spend his life always being confused, he would amount to nothing, and he should just give up. He wasn't going to be allowed to waste the government's money.

Through his own disabilities, and the disabilities that many of his friends who were also Vietnam Veterans, Pimentel found his life changing. And then he met Art Honeyman, a man confined to a wheelchair because he had cerebral palsy.

Pimentel met Art Honeyman at Portland State University where he had finally been allowed to enroll under the G.I. Bill. He knew who Art was because of how he looked and how he talked.

Art's Cerebral Palsy made him a very obvious part of the Portland State campus.

Richard knew that no one could understand a thing that Art said.

And many of them assumed he was deranged.

The first time he talked to Art, Art was fighting against the movements of his body, trying to open a can of pop. Richard went up to him and said: "I see you have a Coke problem." He opened the can of Coke, set it in front of Art

and said to him: "Don't talk to me. No one can understand you. I read lips.

I'm deaf and I can't understand you; I can't read your lips.

If I read those lips, I'll get sea sick and throw up."

Not a very auspicious beginning for a friendship! Richard began to walk away, but then he said, "The most marvelous thing happened. He grabbed me and started talking to me. No one can

understand Art, he makes all these strange noises mixed with his speech because of the Cerebral Palsy.

But guess what all those strange noises were.

They were above my hearing range.

And the only thing I heard from Art Honeyman was what he was really saying,
(because they were in the lower register that I could hear).

And so, the friendship began.

Richard continues with his story telling about the event that changed his life forever. One day Art had a birthday and his sister sent him \$10.00. He called Richard at 3:00 a.m. and said: "Hey Richard, I got \$10 bucks. Pancakes."

Pimentel says: "When you're around 21 years old and someone calls you at 3:00 a.m. for pancakes it sounds like a good idea."

They went to The Pancake House, a place they usually went but that night there was a waitress there who had never seen Art before. Richard says if had been the usual waitress there wouldn't have been a problem.

But this was a woman, he says, who changed my life; "the only woman to change my life with no alimony. "

He continues: "She came up to Art and I thought she wanted us to order. But she said the meanest stuff I ever heard anyone say to Art." She turned to him and she said:

"You're the most disgusting looking person I've ever seen in my life.

I can't believe someone as ugly as you would come to a place where people are trying to eat. I won't serve you. I don't even know if you're a human being."

"I thought people like you were supposed to die at birth."

Richard says: "I'd never heard anyone talk this way. This was a man whose IQ was above my cholesterol level, and he had a sharp sense of humor. He turned to me and he said: "Richard, why is she talking to you that way?"

Then she said that if we didn't leave, she would call the police. We said to call them, and we got arrested.

The police came and said: "If you don't leave, we're going to put you in jail."

Art said: "I want to go to jail. And Richard wants to go to jail too."

They were placed in a holding cell and in the morning, they were fed a breakfast of, yes you guessed it, pancakes.

Then they were accused of breaking an "ugly law."

Richard explains: "This was a law that actually started in Chicago. P.T. Barnum and Co. were in town and people wanted the freaks in the freak show to stay in the freak show. And not come to town to get a burger. So, they passed laws that if you were improper, or a disgusting object, you may not be on the public thoroughfare.

"We were" he says, "found guilty. We came out of the court house and Art looked up at me and smiled. I asked, what the heck are you smiling about?"

He said: We got pancakes and I still got the \$10 bucks.

He concludes: "We decided to change the law. I went from a silent observer of disability apartheid, to an intolerant observer of disability apartheid."

The result of this experience was that Richard wrote a training manual for businesses called "*Tilting at Windmills.*" It was the first training manual ever written for employers on how to work with people with disabilities.

Oregon Business Leadership Network <http://www.obln.org/E-MAG/07/07.09.htm#confronting>

After writing it he was hired by the government and became the trainer for the CIA, NASA, the FBI and many other government agencies. As our veterans began to return from Iraq and Afghanistan in 2008, he developed a new employer training program to support the transition of wounded and disabled veterans living with PTSD, traumatic brain injuries and amputations. “

<http://www.pdx.edu/news/18795/>, Portland State University, Portland, OR, newsletter,
re: Pimentel speaking at the 2008 Graduation Ceremony.

Art Honeyman was the first person Richard had read his book “*Tilting at Windmills*” when the first draft was done. He told Art that if he thought it wasn’t any good, he would just throw it away. There is a wonderful scene in the movie when Art has finished reading and Richard comes into the room to see what he thought of it. Art said:

“Why did you want me to read this?”

Richard answers: “Cause I don’t know what I’m doing Art. But I would never have written that if I hadn’t met you.”

“You don’t have a clue how good this is,” Art says. You know what we cripples want...To be seen.”

“When they look at me no one sees me. They see Nothing. I’m ignored.”

Gesturing to his body twisted by Cerebral Palsy Art asks: “How can you ignore this?”

But they ignore me, because I am so disturbing to their definition of human...

What you’ve created will help to make them see us.”

Music Within, MGM DVD, 2007, including both the film and “special features”

The movie title is taken from the quote: “Many people die with their music still in them. Why is this so? Too often it is because they are always getting ready to live. Before they know it, time runs out.” - Oliver Wendell Holmes

The Canaanite woman wanted to be seen and heard. Seen and heard, not as a Gentile Dog.

Not as a hysterical woman whose screaming bothered the disciples.

Not as a pagan, non-Jewish woman, undeserving of Jesus’ care.

She wanted to be seen and heard as a mother who loved her daughter who needed healing.

She wanted to be known as a woman, who believed that Jesus was a healer sent from God, three times in this short story she calls him Lord.

Green, Joel B, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby, Carolyn J. Sharp, eds,
Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A,

Volume 3 Season after Pentecost, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020, p. 241.1.1.

She wanted to be seen and heard as a believer,

who believed that Jesus had the power to heal her daughter.

She wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Like the waitress in the Pancake House who changed Pimentel’s life forever, this Canaanite woman changed Jesus’ way of thinking forever.

She challenged his racial prejudice that was based on what everyone believed where he’d been raised.

She challenged his beliefs that Jews were more loved by God.

She challenged his understanding of his mission on earth.

She spoke up. And in speaking up, in being heard and seen for who she was, a child of God, she changed Jesus’ mind and heart.

And Jesus said: “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.”

And it’s important to note that the last words of Jesus recorded in Matthew’s gospel are these:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and

of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 28:19)

This week I've been thinking about why this story was kept in the New Testament. What does it mean for us, that Jesus basically used a phrase like the "N" word when he spoke to this Canaanite woman? He was just as offensive as the waitress in the Pancake House.

What does it mean for us that Jesus was challenged about his racial beliefs and biases, his religious beliefs and biases about God's children, and his understanding of his call to ministry?

What does it mean for us that Jesus changed his mind?

Maybe this story is in the Bible exactly because it is so unexpected and surprising. Maybe this story is meant to be is our Canaanite woman, our waitress at the Pancake House, that forces us to make a change.

If even Jesus could be challenged in his racial prejudice, and his understanding of whom God loves, and the direction God wanted him to take, then what about us?

If even Jesus could be challenged to change, then are the places that we are holding onto the old beliefs that shaped us?

Do we need to be challenged in our racial prejudices, our understanding of who God loves, and the direction God wants us to take in our own lives?

If even Jesus could be challenged to change, then what about us?