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8/16/20—University Presbyterian Church
Matthew 15:10-28

WILLING TO LOSE

Somehow, name-calling has become permissible these days. Whether it is on social media or from our highest government leaders, people are name-calling those they dislike and those they with whom they disagree. Now, when we were children, most of our mothers taught us that name-calling was wrong. You don't call someone a cry-baby, or stupid, or fatso. Such names are unkind and wounding. Some people continue to name-call when they get older. They use racial slurs. They categorize entire groups of people with pejorative descriptions. There is a strategy behind name-calling that is more than just about demeaning or hurting an individual person. Name-calling invites people to dismiss the validity of another person or group. Calling some person or group a name means that the rest of us don't have to take that person seriously, don't have to consider their needs or concerns, don't have to care about them. It silences them and relegates them to an inferior status. That's what Hitler did to the Jews. And it is what some leaders within our country and around the globe are doing today to various groups of people—whether immigrants, or those addicted to drugs, or to minority groups, or to people protesting injustice. Call someone a name and you can dismiss them completely.

It is astonishing to see what kind of hateful rhetoric is accepted with a shrug today. I imagine that this is something of what Jesus was speaking about when he said that it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person but rather defilement is found in what comes *out of* the mouth, for what comes out of the mouth comes from a person's heart. The unclean ugliness of unkind speech comes from a person's the heart.

So it is especially surprising that just after teaching this lesson, Jesus would turn around and name-call. That's what he did to the Canaanite woman. He called her a dog.

Jesus and his disciples had traveled into a Gentile region. Gentiles and Jews did not mix. They did not like each other, respect each other, or associate with each other. Jewish people considered Gentiles to be unclean and impure. And if you were Jewish, you wouldn't want to *defile* yourself by being around them. On top this, the Canaanite was a woman, so she also occupied an inferior social status to men.

But her daughter was ill. And so she summoned the courage to transcend these significant social barriers to seek healing for her daughter. She came to Jesus for help. The scripture passage tells us that she in fact made herself a royal pain, shouting to Jesus from some distance. To be sure, she was respectful. She refers to Jesus as "Lord" and calls him "Son of David." But even as Jesus and the disciples ignore her, she won't quit. Think about maybe an occasion if you have ever been accosted by a persistent pan-handler who won't take no for an answer, and how they kept shouting after you even as you tried to walk away.

The disciples get so annoyed they urged Jesus to send her away. And Jesus tells them, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, Jesus understands the scope of his ministry to be limited to the Jewish people. But the woman draws closer, falls on her knees before Jesus and begs for him to help her daughter. And that is when Jesus makes this really cringe-worthy statement: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

This is one of those Bible passages I wish didn't exist. This passage does not mesh with our understanding of Jesus. I find myself wanting to rescue Jesus from being so narrow-minded. How could he call her a *dog*? Maybe Jesus was testing the woman's faith to see how persistent

she might be. Or maybe Jesus was testing his disciples, to see how they might react and whether they understood the inclusive nature of the realm of God.

Maybe. But what if this story really offers us a glimpse of the very *human* Jesus. We affirm that Jesus was divine. But we also affirm that he was completely human. What if we are witnessing the Jesus who was a product of his culture and his time in history, a man who had a limited understanding of the scope of his ministry? What if this story reveals that Jesus got something *wrong*? Can we handle that?

Calling her a dog was not only demeaning and derogatory, it dismissed her, silenced her, and made it easy not to care about her. She became an “other” rather than a human being.

But the woman herself won’t leave things there. In response to Jesus telling her that it was unfair to give the children’s bread to the dogs, she replies, “Yes Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” She is resolute that even she deserves some of God’s love and care. Her statement reveals a firm belief that “Canaanite lives matter!” She is not going to back down because she believes that she and her daughter matter to God and deserve God’s goodness. This Canaanite woman argues with Jesus and challenges Jesus’ narrow-mindedness.

And guess what? She wins! She wins the argument! When confronted with her wise words and her steadfast faith in the inclusive love of God, Jesus does a complete 180 degree about face.

Maybe a lightbulb went on in his head. Maybe he remembered what he had just taught the disciples about defilement coming out of the mouth and thought to himself, “Dang! I just did the very thing I taught others not to do!” Somehow her words changed Jesus. And he was willing to lose the argument. He knew she was right. And he praised her for her great faith.

Can we handle the idea that Jesus learned something crucial from this Canaanite woman? Certainly he had to learn things throughout his life. He wasn't born knowing everything. Someone had to teach him to brush his hair, to read and write, to work with wood as a carpenter. So is it so hard to believe that someone might have to teach Jesus about the full and astonishing scope of the love of God? What would have been especially surprising is that this someone was such an outsider—a person of another religion, of another culture, of another gender.

Maybe this unsettling story can actually be comforting. Because if Jesus is willing to lose an argument, if Jesus is willing to admit he was wrong, if Jesus is willing to let God change his mind about something, if Jesus is willing to learn something new from an outsider, then we can too. Maybe we can follow Jesus' example and let God into our hearts and minds. Maybe we can let God fill us with love and grace toward an outsider, a person who is different, a group of people we don't care for. And maybe the outsider, the person least like ourselves, can actually teach us something essential about our own faith.

Jesus was willing to lose his argument with the Canaanite woman because he could see the winning truth in what she revealed about the kingdom of God. God's realm of love is wide and inclusive. Everyone is included.

At the end of Matthew's gospel, we get another glimpse into how Jesus' mind has changed when the risen Jesus instructs his followers to, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." *All* nations. Not just the Jewish people. *All* people are included in God's message of love and grace. All people are included and deserve the goodness of God. Jesus has lifted all people from their place on the floor and given them a place at the table. And if Jesus can do this, if Jesus can win by losing, so can we.