

“IT’S WHO WE ARE”
Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 15:21-28
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It really is extraordinary that Jesus healed the daughter of the Canaanite woman that day. There are so many reasons why, when this woman approached him, the story should have had a different ending. She was a woman alone on the road, and she went up to a strange man to have conversation with him. That was simply not done by respectable women in first century Judea. And she was a Gentile. Jews went out of their way to avoid contact with Gentiles. Jesus’ first responses to her—to ignore her, then to tell her to go away—they were entirely appropriate in terms of his time and place. But those responses did not work. She kept drawing closer, prostrating herself in front of him. “Help me,” she begged. And, even then, Jesus cut her off at the knees. “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

Ouch! I think those words would have stopped most of us. But, thank God, not this woman. “Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ tables.” Now I don’t know if it was that line in particular, or her courage in arguing with him, or just the woman’s remarkable persistence in the face of flat-out rejection, but clearly, in that moment, something happened to Jesus. He found himself rethinking what he had always believed, years of religious and cultural “shoulds” and “oughts.” He weighed them against his experience in that moment and, in that balance, his indifference and disdain were transformed by his kindness. He healed the woman’s daughter, and as he continued down the road, he was the person most changed by the encounter.

Quoting from the prophet Micah: “What does God require of us—but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.” What’s amazing to me about this story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, is that we see in it so clearly the importance of all three of these qualities together. In Jesus’ ultimate decision to heal the woman’s daughter, we see him come to a new definition of what is right and just, a definition that was inextricably linked with kindness. And, perhaps most remarkable, because he was Jesus after all and not one of us lesser would-be disciples of God, Jesus found within himself the humility to re-evaluate all those cultural and religious messages he had always taken for granted as correct. He changed his mind, or rather he allowed his mind to be changed... and by a Gentile woman of all people.

Justice, kindness, humility: what I want to say today is not just that they are important each in themselves, but that they are spiritual qualities or virtues that function most completely in relation to each other. Theologically they hold each other in creative and transforming tension. Micah the prophet knew that: that it is the three of them linked together that are the foundation of our faithfulness. They are like a three-legged stool that if we do not have each leg in equal measure, our discipleship will always be off-balance.

It will be flawed, incomplete, lop-sided. It will not follow the example of Jesus.

And I have to admit to you that it’s no accident that I am talking about these two texts—Micah, the Canaanite woman—today. These aren’t the passages I found in the lectionary. I chose them. And I chose them in particular because of... well, the most courteous word I can find is “misguided.” I chose them because of the misguided and extremely dangerous posturing of this

minister in Florida about whom we have all heard way too much, and his devastating threat to burn Qur'ans as an act of Christian witness on the anniversary of September 11. All week, I have been alternately saddened and horrified and angry and even embarrassed to share the name "Christian" with him. As you all know, his Qur'an burning did not happen yesterday, and I celebrate that at least he did not use the anniversary of a national tragedy as his stage for the event. But who knows what he, and others spurred on by him, will do today, tomorrow, and in the weeks ahead.

What is most concerning to me about this man is that he is all about justice and Christian discipleship. He reads his Bible—probably reads it more than most of us—and in its pages, as the defender of God's justice, he finds the justification to burn the sacred book of a devout people. He dishonors and distresses an entire faith tradition by calling their holy book a terrorist document. I would assert that we could unfortunately, but with equal validity, just as easily call our Bible a terrorist document, given the number of times—and I would include this present moment in that number—the number of times that Christians have used the justification of God's justice to visit tragedy and devastation on those different from them, on those who were and are the "Gentiles" of their world view.

Why does this happen? How can we keep it from happening? And most closely, because we, I would say, are Christians who strongly tie our faith to a sense of doing justice: how do we keep check on ourselves so that we don't go down paths as wrong-headed as many who have gone before us?

Justice, kindness, and humility—bound together in equal measure. It's the best, and really the only integrity point I can think of. It kept Jesus from making a terrible mistake with the Canaanite woman. If we follow in his path, it may keep us from our worst mistakes as well.

Earlier this week, as I was obsessing about this man in Florida—he a Christian, I a Christian—I found myself asking how we end up in such different places theologically. And, because, you know history is my thing, I went to my library and I read some old sermons, sermons from the 1830s through 60s of Henry Ward Beecher—congregational minister, brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe—and other prominent 19th century divines who in their day struggled mightily with the issue of slavery. And despite the weight of tradition behind them, and I would guess with some fear and trembling, they preached that "yes, slavery is in the Bible. It is acceptable in the Bible, but the Bible was wrong about that." They just came out and said the Bible was wrong because what they saw when they looked at the chattel slavery of their time was that it was "unjust, inhumane, unkind." Do you know how courageous that was? Do you see how their sense of justice, kindness, and humility together modeled for us, how it opened doors for us as a church to say in later days that segregation was wrong, and later still, that God made us in our integrity gay, straight, bisexual, transgendered, and ten years after that, that we Christians, we are not the one true path to God. We do not just accept, we do not just tolerate, we do not just respect; we, in fact, celebrate the diversity of true religious paths to God of which we are just one. Kindness, justice, humility. If Jesus could accept and reach out in kindness to one who was unacceptable because that was justice, so can we in the church. If Jesus could change his mind, so can we in the church. We can learn. We can grow. As Jesus stretched out his arms on the cross to hold to him even those who abandoned, betrayed, and hurt him, so we can also hold out our arms as

wide as possible to try every day to choose civility over polarization, to choose understanding over mistrust, to not demean, to not patronize, to not terrorize, to try to love even our enemies.

This pastor in Florida—I don't know what it is in the Bible, in his tradition, that sets the course of his theology. But in this church, I believe that what defines us as much as anything else is this morning's texts: Micah 6, Matthew 15. We are a church that does its best to honor diversity, both within and without. We are a church that wishes to be a reconciling and just peace-making force in the world. We are a people who covenant together to listen to each other, to speak and act kindly with each other, to honor each others' journeys, and celebrate whenever any one of us comes to a new understanding of who God is and how God is active in the world. That's who we are as this community of God's people, and on this first Sunday of the program year, after a week where the word "Christian" has been used so divisively, I believe that's worth reminding ourselves of and celebrating. Justice, kindness, humility: may we walk that road together this year and may we be touched, renewed, transformed by that journey. Thanks be to God. Amen.