

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Rev. Claire George-Drumheller
“Witness to the Mercy of God”
Matthew 15:21-28
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 20, 2017

“Well-behaved women seldom make history.” When I was in college, a group of my classmates and I made t-shirts every year for international women’s day. My first year in college, women on campus were invited to submit an influential woman from history to be listed on the back of the shirt; the front of the tee had this quote: “Well-behaved women seldom make history.”

That quote has been attributed to everyone from Marilyn Monroe, to Eleanor Roosevelt, to Anne Boleyn. But according to my extensive google searching, the quote actually originates from a 1976 academic paper written by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. At the time the paper was published, Ulrich was a Ph.D. candidate and now is a professor at Harvard.ⁱ

Ulrich’s quote became so famous, she published a book using the same title; *Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History* was published in 2007, and it examines the ways in which women have shaped history, yes, by being ill-behaved. Rosa Parks, for example, was not well-behaved. She refused to sit in the back of the bus and came to earn the title “the first lady of civil rights.” Elizabeth Cady Stanton was not well-behaved; Stanton was a leading figure of the women’s rights movement in the late 1800s, and before her suffrage work, she was an active abolitionist. Had Harriet Tubman been well-behaved, she would have lived and died a slave; had Tubman been well-behaved, she likely would have been forgotten and left out of history altogether. But, Harriet Tubman was not well-behaved, and shape history, she did, by serving as a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad and by spying for the Union Army during the Civil War.ⁱⁱ

Women we know from history are known largely because they neglected customs, challenged social norms, and fought for change. We know them because they were not well-behaved.

And in scripture today, we meet another ill-behaved woman. The gospel of Mark identifies her as the Syro-Phoenician woman. In Matthew, she is from Canaan. In both gospels, Jesus refers to her as a “dog.” Neither gospel gives her a proper name.

To be sure, this woman was not well-behaved. In the Old Testament, before Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, before the walls came tumbling down, the Promised Land was inhabited by Canaanites. This woman is a Canaanite, and from the very start of her story, we know there is a distance between her and the Judeans. She is a different race; she has a different heritage; she likely practices a different religion. She is the outsider in this scene. To alienate her even more, the woman’s daughter is ill, possessed by a demon, unable to function in society.

Listen for the Word of the Lord:

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps

shouting after us.”²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.”²⁶ He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Matthew 15:21-28 (NRSV)

Charlottesville, VA, made the news last week, and the aftermath has kept it in the headlines. Events at a white nationalist rally led to clashes with counter-protesters and resulted in death and injury. Heather Heyer was killed and many more were injured when a car rammed into a crowd of people. Fatalities don’t stop there; two police officers died in a helicopter crash while simply doing their job monitoring the events.

Racial tension in our country is high; the tension is palpable. And Christian churches across the world are reading this passage today, where Jesus tells a marginalized woman who is a different race, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Tension is high in our nation, violence is up, intolerance is mainstream. And churches everywhere today are telling this *scriptural* story where Jesus doesn’t act like Jesus. Across the country, people come to church with the events of last weekend on their mind and hear this story where Jesus initially denies a woman help because of her race – because he is here for the children and because she is a dog. The week after the events in Charlottesville, this troublesome text is the lectionary gospel reading. That’s very clever, Holy Spirit; good joke.

Traditionally there are three ways to read this troubling text. Some scholars hold that this text is inauthentic - someone made it up. Someone gave into their own prejudices, made up the story up, and attributed it to Jesus. Many have noted that this behavior is not in line with the Jesus we know, who calls the children to come to him, who dines with sinners and tax-collectors, who heals the blind and the lame; that Jesus would not call a desperate woman a dog; that Jesus would not refuse help to a suffering child. Therefore, some biblical scholars have concluded that this story is fiction – troubling fiction, fiction included in our holy scripture, but fiction nonetheless.

If you don’t see this story as fiction, you might read it as authentic, but not as harsh as it seems. Some scholars claim that Jesus did say these words – Jesus behaved in this way – but it’s not as bad as it appears. Subscribers to this “yes, but...” method are careful to soften Jesus’ blow – careful to explain the situation so that our Lord and Savior comes off in a better light. They would argue that Jesus spits out a proverb, not a racist dismissal, no different than saying “Charity begins at home.” They also point out that the Greek word for *dog* can also refer to a household pet, and who doesn’t love their dog? It may be a tad insulting, but not abusive.

Perhaps this story is inauthentic fiction. Or perhaps this story seems crueler than it really was. But there’s still a 3rd way to approach this text: to accept the story as it stands in all its harshness, not writing it off as fiction and not explaining away the sharp edges, but facing the troublesome text head-on. Examining the text as it stands means being honest: Jesus is presented as a typical man of his day, fully living in a culture that is chauvinist and holds prejudice against non-Jews. At best, Jesus shows a limited perspective; at worst, he acts on racist prejudice. ⁱⁱⁱ

Theologians and scholars have argued about this encounter: whether or not Jesus, as God incarnate, can change his mind; how his response can't be morally wrong because Jesus is without sin; or how Jesus shows here the limitations of his *full* humanity – his grief, frustration, fatigue, and indifference. Rather than spinning wheels about what this story says about the humanity of Jesus, I am interested in what this story says about the humanity of people of faith. The woman is desperate, bold, and unwavering. Even when she is dismissed, she chooses to be faithful instead of well-behaved.

This woman stands witness to the mercy of God. She has trust that God's mercy is big enough that she might get some of the crumbs from the children's table. This is a story about a woman's faithful witness to the mercy of God; this is a story about a God whose mercy is so wide, even the crumbs are big enough for all of us.

To be sure, our God is a God of mercy: a God who lovingly crafted creation, calling it *good*; a God who has shown us steadfast love, in spite of constant human failure; a God who took on human flesh so that God would share life with us and so that we can have new life; a God who gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, who kindles faith in us and leads us into truth; a God who becomes known to us in the sacraments: in the joyful feast, where we have a foretaste of the Kingdom of God; in baptism, which signifies the faithfulness of our God and our adoption in to the covenant family of the Church.

The Canaanite woman stands witness to this God – to this God whose mercy is so wide. "Have mercy on me," she pleads; even the crumbs of that mercy are bountiful. This woman knew pain and suffering, living on the margins of the margins with her tormented daughter. Our world knows pain and suffering, and the death and injuries in Charlottesville and the continuing vitriol and intolerance are just the tip of the iceberg. In response to the events in Charlottesville, leaders of the PC(USA) issued a statement. In part, it reads this way:

We acknowledge that Scripture has been misused to justify white supremacy and racism. However, we proclaim that the Bible's message presents a far more consistent and insistent witness to God's love for diversity and justice. This may be observed in God's delight in the varied creation; heard in the words of prophets who reject oppression and commend justice as true worship; seen in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, who values all persons regardless of any aspect of their identity; and experienced through the work of the Holy Spirit, who consistently blows through all the divisions we create, to reveal God's love for all humanity.^{iv}

God's love for all humanity. Earlier in the gospel of Matthew, before we meet this Canaanite woman, Jesus fed a crowd of 5,000; a few chapters later, he will feed again another crowd of 4,000. The Canaanite woman could have been well-behaved, waiting patiently for her turn at the table, or perhaps not even asking for a taste of what God has to offer. But instead of being well-behaved, this Canaanite woman stands witness to God's mercy, confident that even the crumbs of God's mercy are enough.

God calls us to be faithful, too, even when it means we cannot be well-behaved. God calls us to be faithful, even when it means challenging authority, challenging ourselves, or challenging the systems that make us comfortable. We are invited to participate in this Canaanite woman's witness that God's mercy is wide enough – God's mercy is big enough.

In all the images you've seen about Charlottesville, I'm sure you've seen this one: a group of 18-22-year-olds wearing college gear, standing behind a sign that reads, "Virginia students act against white supremacy." Perhaps well-behaved college students would have cloistered themselves in the library, hunkering down with their books and turning a blind eye to what was going on outside. The invitation to faithfulness comes at all ages and in all phases of life. Every day we are presented with the chance to witness to God's mercy. God's gift of mercy never runs out, and the opportunity to witness to that mercy never stops.

For college students, perhaps witnessing to God's mercy means involvement in religious life or interfaith activities; maybe it means glancing up from your books to examine God's world around you. Faithfulness surely means using the precious knowledge you will gain here at Davidson to make God's world a little more in line with God's Kingdom.

Maybe for those of us in the pews or those listening on the radio, faithful witness does mean participating in protests and counter-protests. Or maybe it means giving up precious free time to volunteer your time at Blythe Elementary School. Or becoming a part of a different community and hosting Room in the Inn. Or including projects like the Amigos de Cristo backpack program in your family's monthly budget. Standing witness to God's mercy does mean stepping outside your comfort zone, challenging yourself, seeing the world in a new light.

Standing witness to God's mercy means being faithful, not always well-behaved. It means naming discrimination when we see it and asking for our share of God's mercy when we are complicit. It means setting aside our privilege to examine the world through faith. It means working for God's Kingdom here and now because God's mercy is wide enough, even for this world.

Every day anew, we have an option: we can be well-behaved and ignore our brokenness and the world's demons... or we can stand with the Canaanite woman and witness to God's mercy.

If I had the chance to make that t-shirt all over again – that shirt from my first year of college, the one that listed influential women of history – I might request a couple more names to go in the list. I would add Heather Heyer, who lost her life making a public stance against racial intolerance and hatred; Heather showed up to stand for peace and inclusion and suffered violence. And I would add this Canaanite woman: this ill-behaved outsider, this desperate mother, this minority woman; this woman who had the audacity to point out injustice; this woman who believed in the wideness of God's mercy; this woman who had the faith to speak out. This woman, this nameless Canaanite woman. I would add her to the list.

ⁱ "Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History," Quote Investigator, <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/11/03/well-behaved-women/> (November 3, 2012).

ⁱⁱ Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher, *Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History*. (New York: Knopf, 2007).

ⁱⁱⁱ Hare, Douglas R. A. *Interpretation: Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 176-179.

^{iv} PC(USA) Leaders Comdemn White Supremacy, Racism," PC(USA) News, <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2017/8/14/pcusa-leaders-condemn-white-supremacy-racism/> (August 14, 2017). Signed by Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, II; Tony De La Rosa; Rev. T. Denise Anderson; Rev. Dr. Jan Edminston