

August 20, 2017
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

“God Hears! Do We?”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 ~ Matthew 15:21-28

In his poem “Ash Wednesday, T. S. Eliot asks, “Where shall the word be found?”
Where shall the word be found, where will the word resound? Not here, there is not enough silence.”

We must crave silence. Just this week a 10-minute-long track ... consisting of nothing but silence ... is making a thunderous impact on the iTunes charts. Silence. The absence of noise. A space for peace. A space for healing. The prelude to listening. But a funny thing *often* happens when you call for silence in worship ... an epidemic of respiratory problems seize the lungs and people across the room begin to cough. Everyone gets a little restless. Maybe it's just too close. Silence seems to scare us in worship. We may hear “voices.” We may hear voices that we have sought to stifle ... to subdue. We may hear the voices of our own demons. We may hear the voice of God.

Jesus and the disciples had heard enough, especially from the Pharisees. So, they went way “up north” to get away. That's what Jesus and the disciples wanted ... that's what they needed. That crazy woman had no business disturbing their peace. She was a Canaanite ... they were Jews. They were God's own people ... she was a pagan without God. She was a woman ... they were men. They were on a retreat ... she was on the advance ... assertive, aggressive, annoying!

Matthew says she was shouting at them. “Have mercy on me, Lord, son of David!” she screeches, “My daughter is tormented by a demon!” Like mother, like daughter, it would seem. Which one has the demon? And she *knows* better! She *knows* that he is a Jew ... that he is a man ... that he is not her kind ... and still she ignores all the boundaries of dignity, propriety, and good manners, and shouts at him ... kyrie elieson! Lord, have mercy!” Again, and again ... Screech! Screech! Screech! Like fingernails on a chalkboard. That crazy woman! She doesn't know her place.

Jesus.... ignores her ... doesn't answer at all ... doesn't even appear to hear. It's an acquired skill ... one that my husband has certainly mastered. Hey, we all learn how to set our boundaries, don't we? In order to block certain unwanted sensory perceptions, we don't see the beggar on the street. We don't hear the women who are battered. So, they are invisible to us. And silent. Only this silence isn't golden. This silence doesn't heal. This silence doesn't restore. This silence divides. This silence stifles. This silence kills. But it's the way of the world. Power always ignores the powerless. *We feel it* when it comes from those who are more powerful ... but *we're oblivious* when we're the ones with the power. Yes, Jesus turns a deaf ear, so that crazy woman turns up the volume.

Screech! Screech! Screech! The disciples say, "Shut up! Go away! But she persists. Screech! Screech! Screech! Jesus yawns, not phased, not troubled ... he doesn't even answer her ... he doesn't even acknowledge her existence ... he refuses even to hear her cry. With most people, ignoring them would have ended it. But this woman ... do you notice how once again the gospel writers don't even remember her name? ... this woman refuses to give up. Finally, the disciples get totally fed up and urge Jesus, "Send her away."

Do you remember? That's exactly the same thing they said about the hungry crowd in the story you heard just two weeks ago, when Jesus fed more than five thousand. That seems to be their solution to every human problem which confronts them. "Send them away." People like "this woman" interrupt our flow and ask something of us we may not be able to give. They make problems. We wish they *would* just go away. We hope they *will* just go away. But they *won't* go away.

This woman didn't go away, so Jesus put her off, explaining, "*I was sent to the lost house of Israel.*" It was a boundary issue. She wasn't one of "us" ... she was one of "them." In those days Jews had good reason to avoid Gentiles. Jewish law said that the Gentiles were impure and should be avoided. We religious people are always tempted to prize purity over compassion ... and use scripture for permission to reject people in need. It's easier than dealing with them! And Gentiles were dangerous. This woman's people had done some horrible things. And Gentiles were strange. They ate pork and shellfish ... they mixed meat and dairy ... they worshipped idols ... they jabbered in strange languages. They were so different ... just plain weird. Jesus came to be the Messiah of the Jews. The Gentiles weren't even expecting a Messiah. They weren't the chosen people. God's promises weren't for them.

But this woman didn't know when to quit. "*Lord, help me!*" she prayed. When you're desperate, the boundaries don't matter ... and her love for her daughter made this woman desperate. Jesus responded, "*It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*" Dogs! That's the racial insult that Jews used for Gentiles. They thought, "Those Gentiles live like dogs. They eat like dogs. They bark like dogs. They have the morals of dogs. They're all dogs." Dehumanizing a whole group of people gives us permission to neglect, abuse, or even annihilate them. That's the way prejudice works.

Jesus doesn't actually call this woman a dog, but it's very close. What Jesus is saying isn't lost on the disciples or this woman either. This was an insult. The Jews are God's children ... she is a dog. But still this woman wouldn't give up. "*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.*" And then something truly miraculous happened ... Jesus was moved. Jesus was impressed. Jesus *changed* his mind! Remember "little faith" from last week? Jesus called Simon Peter "little faith," "puny-faith," "teenie-weenie faith," when Peter jumped out of the boat and sank like a rock. This week, just a few verses later, Jesus called this woman - "great faith," "mega faith," "super-duper faith," ... and she wasn't even a member of his church! Doesn't it just "gall y'all" when an outsider shows more faith in God than you do? So, Jesus told her: "*Let it be done for you as you wish,*" and Matthew tells us "*her daughter was healed instantly.*" See what just a crumb from the master's table will do! Thanks be to God!

Still, this story troubles me, and there's no easy way around it. I wish it had been Peter who ignored this woman and then said these awful things to her so that Jesus could come to her rescue at the last moment ... but no. Jesus, the Son of God, the Word made Flesh, our Savior ... ignores her ... rejects her ... insults her, all but calls her a Gentile dog, and finally answers her. This is not the Jesus we usually see. What do we do with that?

I get no satisfaction from the people who claim Jesus was just leading her along to teach the disciples a lesson ... that he knew all along that he would heal her daughter ... but that he's playing her for the disciple's sake. That seems like cruel and arbitrary exploitation to me. You don't treat people that way, especially when they are wounded and desperate. No, the *only* explanation I find satisfactory for Jesus' behavior in this story is that Jesus *learned something* from this woman about racism and sexism ... and then he *changed* because of this encounter with her. Like most of us he was reared in a culture that said, "We are God's preferred people; everybody else is junk." He was taught that Gentiles are dogs ... that you should not welcome them ... that you should not trust them ... that you should not have anything to do with them.

He was reared in a culture where women were considered inferior to men and told they should keep their place. He was reared in a culture that said the rich and powerful are beloved of God ... and the poor and the sick are cursed by God because of something they must have done. You know how deeply these prejudices get planted. They are in the way the society is structured ... in the way people behave ... in the way things just are and always have been. That is why every one of us must admit our own hateful prejudices and unlearn them too. But that takes work. Opening yourself to the new ... and learning to love a human being who is very different is hard work. It's always easier just to hate and to reject, as we saw so tragically in Charlottesville in an unprecedented act of hate, and these events are becoming increasingly more common.

I believe this woman showed Jesus that women and Gentiles were God's beloved people, too. I believe that Jesus learned, or rather *unlearned* what his culture had given him. And, whatever your understanding of God in Christ ... unless Jesus was capable of learning and changing ... of growing and gaining by conversation with other people ... he was not truly human. But I believe he was. And I believe he gave us an example here of what it means to learn ... what it means to change ... what it means to work on our own stuff ... what it means to grow in God's grace. And even if you don't like the idea that Jesus needed to learn anything at this stage of his life ... I would argue that you and I *do*. And that we *must*, both as Christians and the church of Jesus Christ.

In a country where our political, social and economic differences have divided us to the point of outright violence against our fellow Americans, the Church can no longer remain on the sidelines of this cultural epidemic. And while I am passionate that my words from the pulpit should steer clear of politics in order to keep the gospel central ... racism transcends politics and it *is* a gospel issue. White supremacy is *not only* a misguided movement ... it is *evil!* It is antithetical to the way of Jesus, who came to "set the oppressed free." His life work was to guide us into one new people characterized by his other-worldly love, humility and generosity. Where we, and the church, are guilty of prejudice, bigotry, and racism we *must* repent.

As followers of Christ, who have been shown love and grace by God, we have the responsibility to be ambassadors of this message of grace to our nation. We must condemn the actions of those

who promote or justify the errant ideologies of hate, injustice, bigotry and racism. We must correct false understandings. True change and healing in this country will only come from a deep commitment to love and be reconciled with our neighbors ... no matter what political or ideological differences we may have with them.

We cannot expect the healing of the deep emotional wounds of our nation to occur if we, the Church, are not willing to engage in loving our neighbors. The path of making peace with our neighbors is difficult, but it is clear from the scriptures that Jesus did not give his disciples any avenues to avoid this mandate. With his last breath, in the face of all of the hatred and sin of mankind, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them." The message of Jesus' life and teaching is this: in the face of deep hate, there can be only one response of the Church ... deep, unyielding love ... an unconditional love for our neighbor that moves us to actions of reconciliation.

We must step up and lead the way. By faith we must engage in this difficult work, *believing* that God will move ahead of us. We *must* commit ourselves to living out the gospel of reconciliation ... circumstance by circumstance ... day by day ... relationship by relationship and community by community, *believing* that God has the power to open the eyes of the blind and break the chains of those in bondage. I recall the words of the prophet Isaiah as he led the people of God in his day. They had prayed and fasted. They had gone through their religious rituals. They had given their tithes and offerings. Yet God had not shown up in the way they had expected. God's response was that they had missed the mark. "Is not *this* the kind of fasting I have chosen ... to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter ... when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I" (Isa. 58:6-9).

May we now pray, in silence?