

Sunday, May 21, 2023

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 34:17

GOSPEL READING: Matthew 15: 21-28

Sermon Series: Conversations that Move Mountains
Week 2

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

- We are continuing in week two of our sermon series, *Conversations that Move Mountains*. This is a six-week sermon series that will examine how conversations might transform our communities and interpersonal relationships with one another, so that we can get that much closer to becoming the beloved community we are called to be; **where all** are able to sit at the table of grace, love, mercy and justice together.

- So last week, I named that the conversation that I felt led to begin with, that I believed was time for this community to have— **is a conversation about faith.**
- For some may find it rather odd that being in a Church of all places, **we have not already** had this conversation about faith;
- And my response would be that as a Church community, I know we have in many ways indirectly talked about our faith, **when we are talking about Jesus;**
- However, as I am approaching year 4 of serving as your spiritual leader, I feel more comfortable to name, that I have often felt uncertain about how to lead this particular community into having a more direct and personal conversation about faith.
- This is mainly because for one, there is a cross cultural component that exists, that I quite frankly

was not quite sure of how to broach this topic of faith.

- For in the Black Church experience that I was trained in, faith was expressed differently.
- For **there were folks** in my former context, who would often dance and shout and even sometimes fall out, as a result of being slain in the Spirit.
- **There were folks** who would say Amen regularly throughout the sermon and shout words of affirmation throughout the sermon as I have shared before;
- However what I haven't shared with you as your preacher, is that how you know when you have really **struck a chord** in the sermon in the Black Church experience, is when your keyboardist/pianist would be moved by the Holy Spirit, to literally strike a chord on their keyboard/piano and then take it up a few octaves higher and higher, **as they become** one with you in God's Word, **as they**

usher you to go even further and deeper in God's Word...

- This is a long way of me naming that I will always cherish the Black Worship Experience;
- Furthermore, as a preacher, **I pray that I never lose** those chords and octaves in my head and heart, that will always remind me **to keep going** further; **to keep going** deeper; **to keep encouraging** others to go deeper in God's Word, so that a true relationship can be established with God;
- **I'm talking about a relationship** like Adam and Eve had with God, walking in the Garden of Eden, before they realized that being "naked" was a bad thing. (Genesis 3:11)
- What I also need to share with you as your preacher, is that although I have fond memories of my ministerial training, I also have come to realize that just because the Black Church experience may

be more vocal in their faith and may even be more vocal during sermons, does not mean that those communities had more faith.

- For faith is not just about our ability to say Amen or be slain in the Spirit.
- Faith for me, is about being able to apply God's Word to our personal situations; especially during our times of trouble and crisis.
- Therefore, in my sharing in this intimate way with you, this does not mean that I now expect to have an Amen corner, or a shouting and praising corner, nor do I expect Alicia and Leila to begin modeling the same piano/organist movements during the sermons.
- The purpose of my sharing in this manner with you, is so that you can simply get to know me better, as I get to know you better; as we are striving as a community **to do life together...better.**

- Furthermore, I wanted to share with you that being in this ministerial setting, I have learned to appreciate not receiving the verbal exchange during my sermons, in exchange, for physically getting to see how the mustard seeds that I named last week being everywhere—— **getting to see** where those seeds have begun to take root and flourish.
- For every time someone who normally does not speak in our congregation, decides to read the Call to Worship, or take on a new leadership position, or sing a solo or chair a committee...**for me that is witnessing a mustard seed take root.**
- When I got to see Tessa and Philomena playing in their band concerts at Mickle this past week, **for me that is witnessing a mustard seed take root.**
- When I got to witness and participate with the United Women of Faith in their small group, sharing about the history of their aprons and what they

were used for and who they were made by....**for me that is witnessing a mustard seed take root.**

- All of this and more is why I am beginning this conversation in this way, to name that this community...to emphasize that you all here at Lincoln First.... **you have struck a chord within me**; that although is very different than the keyboardist in my former context; **it is still just as powerful...it is ever just as meaningful to me...** all which let's me know, that there is no conversation that any of God's people should be afraid or hesitant to have with one another.
- For as Romans 8:28 teaches us; we are one community, called according to one purpose; thereby informing us that in all things, God will work through our efforts and turn it out for good, all because we are striving to love God and love our neighbor!

- **So thank you for allowing me to have this conversation with you, that will hopefully make our relationship even more special; even more closer...for I have also found that having conversations that are clothed in love, trust and vulnerability, are what really moves the mountains between people, and allows us to sit at the table with one another—**
- Having conversations like these is what might even allow us to be able to talk about something as personal as faith together;
- For the second observation I have come to realize from being in this ministerial context for some time now, is that some of us, have even been taught that having conversations about faith— is in fact a private matter to have.
- It sort of reminds me of Matthew 6:6 where it says; *But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret;*

and your Father who sees in secret will reward you;
my biggest aha moment as a result of living in
Nebraska for over 7 years now, is that this is how I
imagine faith translates for most in this region;

- **That teaches us that faith** is supposed to be a private thing;
- **That teaches us that** sharing in our faith should be a personal matter—
- **This is similar to how our gospel unfolds for us this morning;**
- However I am not directly referring to our gospel of Matthew this morning.
- What I am naming though, is that this same story that is occurring in our gospel this morning, also occurs in the Gospel of Mark.
- Furthermore, what is remarkable about the way that the stories are told, it is similar to how I shared the differences between the Black Worship

Experience that I was trained in and this worship context that I am blessed to serve in right now.

- For the way that Matthew tells this story, is similar to the Black Worship Experience that I shared in that it is vocal, public, and very descriptive and dramatic;
- I'll read the gospel of Matthew again although Tina did a fabulous job reading it earlier;

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 from that moment.*

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- Meanwhile this same story in Mark 7: 24-30 is told in a very private, almost secretive manner;
- Listen to these words;

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre.⁹ He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, **25** but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. **26** Now

the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. **27** He said to her, “**Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.**” **28** But she answered him, “Sir,^h even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” **29** Then he said to her, “**For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.**” **30** So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

- So before we unpack these differences any further, I need to attribute the main scholarship and research of these passages to our own youth Malcolm Sattler, who was an active part of our Wednesday Night Applying the Sermon to Life.
- For what Malcolm learned, in which I wholeheartedly affirm as I too have preached and researched this gospel before in my ministerial career, but I would be remiss if I did not declare

that this young man **has struck a chord within me** with the detail of his research;

- Therefore in sharing in Malcolm's email to me directly after our class regarding these texts, because his research is **just that good**...he writes;

Dear Kirstie,

I have looked into the bible verses pertaining to the Canaanite woman and have found a few things to report upon. First of all, Canaanites are those who come from their patriarch Canaan, who disgraced his grandfather Noah. Syrophonician as Mark refers to the woman is of the Phoenician region of Roman Syria. Either way she can be identified as a Greek. This leads us down a further path of how she may have interpreted the words of Jesus specifically likening her to a dog. The Jews believe dogs to be unclean animals as they walk upon paws, but the Greeks do not and even keep dogs as pets. Given this it is possible that this led to her rebuttal about

dog's eating from the master's table as Jews would not keep dogs and thereby be a dog's master.

*Secondly, before this journey to Sidon and Tyre Jesus fed the 5000 and walked on water. This would put his age to be about 32. Knowing he was crucified at 33, this was near the end of his ministry. It is also theorized that as Tyre and Sidon are Gentile territory and that therefore Jesus has little reason to go there, that he retreated to this region from a threat. Jesus' words to the woman could have not been derogatory in nature and simply a way to show her her place as a sinner and undeserving of God's grace that is given regardless of deserving**. Another way this could be taken is that she was not yet of the kingdom of God and it was possibly an invitation to seek God's grace. In the biblical sense house meant a building with people not necessarily one's home. I find a problem in Mark that Jesus had entered a house and at the end the woman in that*

house went home to find her daughter cured. From this we can either assume a translation error or that this may have been some other sort of building or a house of worship. As far as the differences between the Gospels go, following the Markan Priority, it seems Matthew is an exaggerated version of Mark. Matthew is also known to strongly support Jewish traditions so this may lead into prejudice against the Gentiles. I was drawn to Jesus' saying "feed the children first". Clearly children refers to the Israelites. Given that it says first and that Jesus is nearing the end of his ministry this may not have been a rebuke so much as an invitation from Jesus to her as a non-Israelite. This woman's faith persisted and her problems were solved, so a common interpretation is to bring one's problems to Jesus.

- **Folks this is another example of us witnessing the mustard seed take root!**

- Furthermore, in taking all of this in, the million dollar question becomes , “What do we make of these differences in our text?”
- Does these differences change the outcome?
- Does these differences change the meaning?
- Furthermore does these difference inform our faith?
- I am not certain if this sermon will be able to address these questions I have raised or address some of the questions you all may be pondering yourselves.
- What I can take away from this conversation though **is that differences are not a bad thing;**
- Differences may just be just what it is...different....
- For in defining the word different..*it means not the same as another or each other; unlike in nature, form, or quality.....*
- However, the unexpected conversation that I feel led to name today that quite frankly I did not expect

this sermon to entertain at all, yet I feel that in me naming this observation, some mountains may indeed move for us like never before;

- **Is this idea that different is just different...but it doesn't make it wrong!**
- Yes Church family, I believe we may have cracked a powerful code in our human struggle and dilemma.
- And that is in life, as I bring in our first lesson that I intentionally kept brief, to allow the conversation to move the way it needs to;
- Is that when Psalm 34:17 says *When the righteous cry for help,*

The Lord hears and rescues them from all their troubles.

- One of the major troubles that I believe humanity needs to be rescued from, is this idea that **just because something is different, makes it wrong;**

- For this is the human dilemma we all are wrestling with as a society today!
- Various groups of people being isolated and marginalized and even brutalized **for being different;**
- In bringing in our reconciling statement as a Church in which I haven't directly named in a while; First Church Lincoln is a community centered, focused and driven community seeking to share God's affirming love to everyone. We are a Reconciling Congregation whose story reflects a statement of diversity and love for all. First Church is inclusive to all persons regardless of education, ability, economic status, gender, race, ethnic group, age or sexual orientation.
- Essentially what we are naming as a Church community in this statement is that **different is just different...but it doesn't make it wrong.**

- This is the heart of what our gospel is naming, whether you prefer the Markan presentation of the story or the Matthew presentation of the story;
- For what Jesus is identifying through this woman who I would also name, reveals to us the power of what our mustard seed faith can really look like at its finest, is this awareness that although Jesus initially came to deliver the Israelite children, the mission shifted and expanded, once this Canaanite woman came along to advocate for her and her daughter's right to be at this table of good news too;
- For although this Canaanite woman was very different from the Israelites;
- For we see the prejudice that the Israelite people had towards her in calling her a dog;
- However, when Jesus affirmed her in saying *"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you*

as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that moment;

- This became the critical point in our Christian history, where it became clear and apparent that the Gospel was not just for the Israelite Children, but the gospel was for the Gentiles too....
- And I don't know about you, but as I witness this woman's movement in this text, I can't help but reflect back to the Nehemiah Action Event at the Lancaster Event Center on May 4th again, and proclaim that she is what negotiating for justice in these oppressive systems should look like!
- For this woman could have gotten hung up on a lot of troubles that day;
- **She could have gotten hung up** on the fact that Jesus was seemingly dismissing her;

- **She could have gotten hung up** on the fact that everyone thought of her and her daughter to be that of a dog;
- However, she did not allow any of that to sway her from her one goal and one goal only;
- To advocate for her daughter for that **one crumb**;
- Similar to how we are advocating in our county and city for **one crumb** of justice on behalf of those who are stricken with mental illness and is unable to navigate the maze of mental health resources that exists;
- Similar to how we are advocating for the jails to be reduced in capacity so that all can have access to the **one crumb** of diversion programs and possibilities that will allow people to be able to be rehabilitated.
- For my human instinct is to declare that it is flat out wrong that any of us should rely on mere crumbs to begin with;

- But just as the imagery of Heather our scientist that I preached on last week (Malcolm's mother), working with the mustard seeds and them being everywhere from last week;
- I think about how crumbs tend to work in the same manner as well; (move to the altar)
- For in looking at this piece of bread, and breaking it before us all...we can see that crumbs tend to go everywhere as well;
- Thereby, letting us know that this Canaanite woman in all of her differences, was really onto something powerful;
- For one crumb, although it may not seemingly be enough, it is a heck of a good start...for the crumbs are everywhere!
- May the words from my mouth, and thoughts of all of our collective hearts, be transformed because of our differences through you Christ Jesus!
- Amen.

