
Be the change
Chapel in the Park United Church
February 1, 2026
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Mathew 15:10-28

Did anyone feel a sense of whiplash when we just heard that reading from Matthew? It seemed like two different stories. Not only that, but the stories seem to contradict each other. What is going on here?

At the start of the reading, Jesus said that what goes into our mouths does not matter. What matters is what comes out of our mouths. Well, that is classic Jesus. He was clearly trying to deliver a stinging attack on the Pharisees. Because the Pharisees cared about what went into our mouths. And Jesus cares about what comes out of our mouths. Or in plain English - the Pharisees care about rules. And Jesus cares about relationships.

And - if we stop reading right there - we have a coherent message that perhaps will not offend us. Jesus is simply lifting up the idea that how we live our lives - including how we speak to other people - is important. That's a nice message for today.

Unfortunately - for us - the reading does not stop there. In the very next paragraph, Jesus completely ignores a person because she is not Jewish, and because she is a woman. Jesus then moves from ignoring her to insulting her. Comparing the non-Jewish woman to a dog.

So in the first part of the reading Jesus states that it is what comes out of our mouths that defiles us. And in the second part of the reading, Jesus uses his own mouth to spew hatred at a complete stranger. Using words that are misogynistic and xenophobic.

What is going on here? Perhaps something very unusual is going on. Or perhaps something very common is going on. Perhaps something is going on in these two stories that still goes on today.

To try to make sense of this, let's start by reviewing the list of things that Jesus said defile a person.

“Evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander”. What do you think of that list? To me, the list is very incomplete. I hope we all noticed that

there is no prohibition against hatred. There is nothing against intolerance. Nothing against racism, sexism, or any other “ism” you can think of. Nothing even against slavery.

The list of actions that Jesus says are bad for us speak only to how to treat people in our own social group. In fact, the list only covers the social conventions found in the 10 commandments. There is nothing in that list that speaks to how we should treat people who are different from us. And in Jesus day, in the Jewish community, women and foreigners were marginalized.

The text is hard to read today. But we should expect that. Jesus grew up in culture that was narrow-minded, racist, exclusivist and sexist. We like to think that we are more advanced today. But speaking personally, I too grew up in a culture that was largely narrow-minded, racist, exclusivist, and sexist. Have we really made no progress on racism and related social diseases in the past 2000 years? Really?

This sermon does not appear to be leading towards hope anytime soon. Perhaps we need to consider a different lens. A different perspective. And it’s actually right in front of us.

Our discomfort with the text is that Jesus marginalizes a foreign women who is a stranger. So perhaps the cure is for us to actually listen to the woman ourselves. What can we learn if we listen to the Canaanite woman in this story?

Perhaps the most apparent thing about the woman is simply the fact that she refuses to go away. She refuses to let herself be put into a box. She refuses to be silent. She refuses to be silent because she knows that she is right.

The Canaanite woman speaks truth to power. In the conversation, Jesus is holding all the cards. He is a man. He is Jewish. He has the power to heal. The woman only has a sick daughter. But she speaks truth to power. Speaking truth to power doesn’t always mean going to a rally or writing to your MP. Sometimes it means refusing to disappear.

The Canaanite woman does not accept Jesus’s attempt to erase her sense of self-worth. Her daughter is a child of God and deserves to be healed. It is that simple.

The Canaanite women says one other thing that actually blows my mind. She declares that the promises of God apply to her and her daughter. Not just to the “house of

Israel". The woman forces Jesus to re-read his own religious narrative. She decisively states that all people are children of God. No exceptions. And Jesus - to his credit - takes that point to heart.

The text we read from Matthew is not found in our lectionary. Well, the two parts of the story are. But the lectionary does not want us to read those stories together, as we have done. I selected the full text because this is the beginning of Black History Month. Because everything I just said about the Canaanite woman parallels the actions of many black people over many centuries.

Black History Month exists because black people have been marginalized for centuries. And still are, in far too many ways. Right here in Canada. Even here in Toronto.

The Canaanite woman was like Rosa Parks. A black woman who refused to give her seat to a white passenger - as was required by law - in Montgomery Alabama, in 1955. Parks spoke truth to power in order to help bring healing to her entire community. That is the story of the Canaanite woman.

The Canaanite woman was like Viola Desmond, a black woman who refused to leave the whites-only section of a movie theatre in Nova Scotia, in 1946. That's here in Canada! Desmond did not sit in the seat she was told to sit in. She sat where she belonged! That is the story of the Canaanite woman.

There are many stories like that. Ida B. Wells did the same thing with a pen instead of a seat. Martin Luther King Jr. did it from a pulpit. Again and again, black voices have refused to be silenced. And have forced society to re-read it's own narrative - sometimes in a more just and loving way.

Where is our hope now? Our hope does not come from ignoring the story in Matthew. Our hope does not come from pretending that the story is about the past. The story is very much about our present. Sadly. Our hope does not come from pretending that the story does not hurt. The story hurts all of us actually - whether we identify with the victim or the aggressor. The story hurts us all. Our hope comes from listening to the voices that refused to disappear. Like the Canaanite woman.

Black History Month exists for the same reason this story exists in Matthew. Because powerful communities are very good at forgetting the voices that challenged them ... and won.

Black History Month is not the black community pleading for special favours. The black community only wants the privileges that everyone else already has. The Canaanite woman's daughter - as a child of God - deserved to be healed. It is that simple.

There is no question that racism and sexism have changed in the last 2000 years. And many of those changes were quite recent. Women in Canada could not vote in every province until 1940. Women in Canada were not able to have their own credit card until 1969. We have made some progress.

But at the same time, racism and sexism still flourish. One report said that approximately 50% of black Canadians experience discrimination on a daily basis. Today. Here. We have not solved this problem. The story of the Canaanite woman is about us. Today.

I imagine we all want to live in a world where racism and sexism are only words found in history books. That we want to live in a world of peace. Peace that comes from justice and equity.

We do not live in that world today. So that must mean that we want change. The bad news is that we have to do that change ... ourselves. The good news is that we can do it. We can be the change that we need.

I am always intrigued when our government want to give money to fight racism. Racism comes from our hearts. How can money fix that? Some things in life are free. And liberating ourselves from small-minded fears including racism and sexism can be done anytime, anywhere, for free.

Mahatma Gandhi summarized this nicely saying "be the change you want to see in the world". In my experience, that actually works when we ourselves are willing to make some effort. If we are waiting for someone else to solve this problem for us ... we will be disappointed.

I agree with Gandhi that we need to be part of the solution. Our government - or our churches - cannot change our hearts. We have to do that ourselves. Governments and

churches should play a role, of course. They should put on programs and offer training and other supports. But the change we actually need is in our own hearts.

I'm sure we have all heard the expression, "Change what you can, accept what you cannot change and be smart enough to know the difference". There is much to affirm in that statement. But I think it is also limiting. Because how do we know what we can change and what we cannot change? I think we often imagine that many things are impossible and then we do not even try.

I want you to put your minds back in in time to 6 years ago. Put your minds back to before we even heard the word "COVID". Because I'm sure that most of us have stories we can share about something that was impossible for us 6 years ago that we now do on a regular basis. How many of us would have said it was impossible to use video conferencing 6 years ago? And yet, we now use Zoom on a regular basis. Many of us have learned to embrace technologies we used to think were beyond our grasp. From using Uber to online shopping. The pandemic forced many of us to do things today that 6 years ago we would have called impossible. And yet, today, we do those "impossible" things all the time.

We were taught to accept the things we cannot change. And I agree with that. But we should not minimize our own capacity to change and to grow. I believe that we as a society will someday put an end to racism. We will defeat racism. But we have to keep working to that end.

Today, it is very easy to make some forward progress on racism and sexism. Simply treat every person you meet as a child of God. When you go shopping, simply be friendly with everyone you meet. Exchange a greeting. Go a little deeper if they reciprocate. Don't target any particular demographic. Just reach out with compassion to all people. Wherever you live I guarantee if you try reaching out to everyone, you will touch people from many different backgrounds and cultures. You can meet and greet the world without leaving town ... and that is a wonderful gift.

The Pharisees cared about rules. Jesus cared about relationships. The rules say that we should be afraid of people we do not know. The drive to build relationships says that a stranger is just a friend you have not met.

Jesus had part of the answer. What comes out of our mouths matters. A great deal. But so does whether or not we are willing to hear what other people are saying.

Listening is when we are willing to be changed by a conversation with another person.

(Re-read that line)

We need to listen to all voices. Including voices we do not expect. Including voices we may not like.

Go and make friends with the world. You do not even have to leave your own community to do it. We just need to listen.

We can be the change.

Amen.