

“The God Who Listens”
Matthew 15:1-2, 10-28
Andrew Foster Connors
11th Sunday after Pentecost
August 16, 2020

It’s hard to believe that Jesus – our model for inclusion - actually compares this Canaanite woman and her child to dogs. -Calls them dogs because they are not part of his religious/ethnic group. We can do what we can to make the best of Jesus’ insult – Maybe he was tired from his 40 mile journey up to the outskirts of Tyre and Sidon, he didn’t really mean to call her a dog. Maybe he was only testing her to see how she would react. Maybe he meant to call her a puppy – not a putdown but a term of endearment. We can do our best to protect our image of the Jesus we want to know as the friendly, pastoral, never-offend-the-good-people type of person, but an insult is an insult. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” “My healing is for my people. It’s not for you. My children are my priority; your child is not my concern.”

Jesus *was* human. That’s the way I’ve defended him in the past. I’ve never lost sleep over the idea that Jesus felt the emotions that we feel, faced similar struggles that we face, that he learned and grew and developed in ways that are similar to our own journeys. I’ve never even been bothered by the fantasies of some authors or movie makers that Jesus may have fallen in love, had sex, or gotten married and had children. None of these things has ever been proven, of course, but it wouldn’t bother me if some fragment of evidence showed up tomorrow shattering some theologians’ view of the Jesus who floats above the banalities of our existence.

Because of my total comfort with Jesus’ humanness, in the past I’ve made light of the knots that some interpreters have tied themselves up in, trying to defend their less-than-fully-human Jesus, the Jesus that they are embarrassed by in this text. But if I’m honest, it’s not the humanity of Jesus that bothers me in this text. It’s his divinity. If you accept one of the central teachings of the Christian faith - that Jesus was more than a prophet - that he was God with us, then it leads you to consider some pretty disorienting things about God. Did God have a bad day? How often does that happen? Did God make a mistake? That would certainly explain a lot about the world today. Has God changed? When I’m honest, I know this is why conservatives try to soften the insult - why they make the dog-calling out to be an old Jedi, master test, not a real insult; it’s why liberals turn from the text itself to argue that this says more about the community that created it - those early Jewish Christians trying to convince other Jews that the original mission had changed in a more expansive direction. The direction that Paul lays out in the Epistle for today. God hasn’t abandoned the Jewish people that

could never happen. Just used their own disbelief to expand God's saving power to the rest of the world in a way that only God can do.

That historical turn of the Christian community is true. But if we take their testimony as *revelatory* - as sharing something with us about the *nature of God*, we have to contend with the idea that at one point in time in history, God's inclusion may have been less expansive than what we proclaim today.

That seems to be the plain implication of the text. It's reinforced in the earlier portion of this reading where Jesus is saying, "what comes out of the mouth is way more important than what goes in it." What comes out of the mouth reveals the heart. Shortly after saying that, what comes out of Jesus' mouth is the clear sense that God isn't as concerned about tending to the needs of one group of people as God is about another.

And I have a very hard time accepting this less inclusive God. I'm not really sure why it bothers me so much since we human beings are so very bad at including even the people that we know God already included eons ago.

Way before Jesus, God warned the community to accept sojourners in the land from the moment Israel established itself in a land, and yet the most recent immigrants in our land are still some of the most vulnerable among us. The positivity rate for the COVID-19 virus has been above 30% for our sisters and brothers at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in 21224. At times it has approached 50% compared to statewide rate that is now less than 5%. Why? They are disproportionately part of the so-called essential workers, their housing conditions are often less than ideal with overcrowding, and despite the fact that they pay taxes they are not eligible for the same benefits that most of us are so when they get sick they still go to work because they have to or they don't eat. In other words, they're sicker because they are more vulnerable and they are more vulnerable because lots of people in our country want them that way including some Christians who pass over all those texts in our Bible commanding us to protect sojourners not exploit them. We're terrible at inclusion.

Our nation just celebrated 30 years of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act and yet I know I've been guilty of complaining about so-called "extra costs" added to building projects; and I've heard others complain about "unfair advantages" given to kids with learning disabilities instead of embracing a vision of community defined by equity - where all people are given what they need to succeed. We're bad at inclusion.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) is 93% white. And yet well intentioned attempts to change that number have often led to the decline of Black institutions and an increase of people of color reporting painful experiences of not belonging in multi-racial

institutions where white people control the resources and people of color are sometimes tokenized.

I know that we are bad at inclusion, I just don't expect God to be bad at it, too. I expect God to be perfect at it - to say the right things, do the right things, act in the right ways all the time. I expect God not to have to grow, because God is already the definition of having reached the pinnacle of perfection. I expect God not to have to learn because God already knows everything there is to know. I expect God not to have to change, because God already gets everything right.

But reading this text I wonder, where did those ideas of God come from? Maybe that concept of God - distance, aloof, perfect meaning one who already has all the answers and doesn't need to listen - maybe that God is more rooted in western, white notions than in the relational God of our tradition. Willie Jennings, in a 2017 lecture at Fuller Theological Seminary entitled, "Can White People Be Saved?" laid out a definition of whiteness that he says came to define Christian Theology, distorting the Christian faith from its origins. "No one is born white," he says. "There is no white biology but whiteness is real. Whiteness is a working. A forming toward a maturity that destroys." Whiteness is an invitation, he argues, toward a form of agency that denies the "voice and vision of people who inhabit place / in ways that deny the logics of life together in a place / as the basic wisdom that should form change and transformation."¹

If I understand Jennings correctly, he's arguing that a basic definition of what it means to be human emerged during the the early period of European colonization that celebrated the ability of some to act on others without their approval or even voice, that celebrated the ability to act on creation without listening to the land that even now speaks to us. That definition of what it means to be human authorized the horrors of slavery and the rise of racist ideas to support it, the increasing destruction of the earth, and the denigration of local forms of spirituality and wisdom that stood as barriers to this definition of humanity that lead to death - death of whoever isn't wielding this power and death. And that basic definition of whiteness became so entangled in our Christian theology that it's hard for us to see it. In fact we will defend it as normative, which I think is what I've been doing to God in this text. Defending the image of a "perfect" God - meaning a God who knows everything already. Defending the image of a God who doesn't need anyone or anything in creation. Defending the image of a God for whom listening is unnecessary, as if that image of God were something for us to aspire to.

Instead, the God that we are actually given, and the humanness that Jesus defines in this text is *the God who listens*. The God who listens to the local whose

¹ Willie Jennings, "Can White People Be Saved: Reflections on the Relationship of Missions and Whiteness," Fuller Theological Seminary, November 2, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9wRvaG9j53g>. Dr. Jennings recently came to Baltimore to address the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies.

wisdom comes from outside what is already known or cherished. The God who listens to the other, to that which is different - different land, different religion, different gender. The God who offers transformation and is also subject to it. And that God is way better news than the “perfect,” removed, cloud-sitting one that still seems to define the Christian imagination more than the gritty, earthy, rooted, inscrutable God that we meet in the text.

The Rev. George Hopkins pastors the Sowebo Community Church. He grew up in Cherry Hill, was reshaped by the evangelical tradition, became a pastor, and we’re now working closely together in BUILD. There are a million ways we are different in our backgrounds. We were talking with a group of other leaders about a new vision for Baltimore - pressing the reset button. And he said something that continues to reverberate with me. He said, “We need a city that listens.” I think his observation is profound. I have sat through way too many meetings in church, in government, in business circles where people have already decided what other people need. Most of our problems could be successfully addressed if the culture of listening permeated all of our institutions. If government managers instead of saying “we’ve got these programs that people need to utilize,” were to say, “what are people telling us about the barriers that they face?” If business leaders instead of repeating what they’ve been taught, saying “we can’t find qualified workers among Baltimore city residents,” were to ask the question, “what can we learn from residents about what they would need to be successful in our institutions?” And if we in the church would spend less time dreaming up programs to push newcomers into and doing more listening to ask, “where are you spiritually hungry in your life? How can the church support you in your journey to becoming more fully the person God has created you to be?” Imagine how the world could change.

Of course, it’s easier said than done. We’re terrible at inclusion. Kamala Harris was barely named the first Black female candidate on a major party ticket and already the angry Black woman racist trope was being trotted out. It’s only been 100 years since women were acknowledged as having the competence to and therefore the right to vote. And I know from where I sit how often people in our community do not feel like they belong.

What I learned from this Canaanite woman is that we don’t have to wait and grumble about it. We can speak when we haven’t been heard. We can listen when we’ve been speaking too much. And somewhere in that messy dialogue there is healing found for those who need it the most. This is the faith that makes us well. Faith in a God who listens, transforms and is transformed in relationship. A God who doesn’t celebrate the distanced, nothing-new-to-learn ideology that has been wrongly named as perfection, but celebrates growth toward compassion, transformation toward justice, understanding that leads us toward peace.

That's my understanding of this God, but I have to say it's a tentative understanding. I'm still praying, still listening, still growing, still changing, and learning to accept that this, too, is good news.