

Sometimes You Have to Shout

Matthew 15:21-28

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Today we begin a new sermon series, The Stories Justice Needs To Tell. I suppose a more honest title would be A Few Of the Stories Justice Needs To Tell. The ideas and actions of justice are so interwoven throughout scripture, it's hard to choose just a few. Our intent over these next several weeks is not to offer an exhaustive treatise on the subject, but rather to offer small glimpses of what justice looks like, where justice lives, and how justice is realized.

Now, there's different types of justice — procedural, distributive, retributive, and restorative — and there's all manner of issues that justice engages — there economic justice, gender justice, food justice, racial justice, environmental justice, and that's to name only a few. So in order that we're all on the same page at the start, here's the definition of justice I'm working with. You might define it differently. That's okay. But the broadest theological definition I can come up with is that justice is the restoration of relationships between human beings and the restoration of relationships with God. The "and" there is a small but essential word. Because for those of us who claim faith in the God of Abraham, our relationships with one another affect our relationship with God, and our relationship with God affects our relationships with one another. One always reflects the other. Justice is when those relationships are healthy and well. Injustice is when those relationships are broken. Scripture assures us that on God's Promised Day, God will bind up everything that is broken. Injustice will be no more. But in the meantime, we are called to live toward that day, to do everything in our power to bring the kingdom of heaven a

little closer. That means we are called — all of us, not just some of us — to the pursuit of justice.

The Canaanite woman in today's scripture reading understands the need for justice deep in her bones. We hear twice that she is shouting. But both times, the verb tenses in the Greek are clear. She didn't shout two times and move along. Both references to shouting are grammatically structured to tell us she was shouting over and over and over, in a manner that would continue indefinitely. The disciples recognize this. Jesus tries to ignore her, and they plead with him, "Send her away. She won't stop shouting."

Of course she's shouting. Consider her situation. She has heard about this man, this Jesus, who heals the sick, walks on water, casts out demons, and challenges authority. She has heard enough that she immediately calls him Son of David. But she has also heard something else — that this one who has the divine ability to make everything that is wrong, right again ... he is not available to her and her people. Healing and transformation is possible, but not for her and her daughter. Because he has come only for the Jewish people, and she is a Gentile. She's heard it before and she's about to hear it again, from Jesus' own mouth.

But then it goes from bad to worse, from distasteful to downright ugly. After Jesus says he didn't come to help people like her, he compares Gentiles to dogs. And for the record, not dogs like mine, who lead incredibly spoiled lives. I'm certain they are both asleep on my bed even as we speak. In Jesus' time and place, though, dogs were little more than a nuisance, and they were never, ever allowed

indoors. In calling the woman a dog, Jesus effectively says, “You will always be outside — outside the reach of my concern.” It might be the lowest point of Jesus’ ministry. But the woman doesn’t miss a beat. And she doesn’t argue with the harsh remark or the reality it conveys. She actually agrees with him. “Yes, Lord,” she says, but then goes on to point out that when the children are fed, the dogs also get some small benefit, even if only by the way of crumbs.

With that comment, the low point of Jesus’ ministry becomes a point of transformation. To see it, we have to look at the way Matthew presents Jesus throughout his entire gospel. The fact that Matthew, Mark, and Luke contain so many of the same stories, but in different order, tells us that when each of them writes down the story of his three years of ministry, they have a bigger purpose in mind than simple chronology.

Matthew opens with Jesus’ genealogy, a long recitation of 48 names spread out over 14 generations. Forty-three of those names are the names of Jewish men. Five of them are the names of Gentile women. This gospel makes it plain from the beginning — without the inclusion of Gentiles, we don’t get to Jesus. But it’s not until Matthew 24, 26, and 28 that Jesus makes his own statements about how the gospel will be preached to the whole world, for all people. It’s in Matthew 20 that he proclaims his life of service is not on behalf of some people, but on behalf of the many.

Notice how that all comes after his encounter with the Canaanite woman in chapter 15.

What’s more, both right before and right after that exchange with her about bread, and crumbs, and who gets to eat, Jesus feeds enormous crowds. The main difference between the two miracles? Before he meets the Canaanite woman, his disciples are the ones

who notice the people are hungry, and Jesus tells them they should find something for the people to eat. Ultimately, he feeds them of course — after it’s brought to his attention by others. After he meets the Canaanite, Jesus is the one who notices. “I have compassion for the crowd because they have nothing to eat, and I do not want to send them away hungry,” he says.

Something in Jesus shifts when he meets this loud, persistent woman. The very structure of Matthew’s gospel points to it. The woman who screams for transformation convinces Jesus to extend the reach of his gospel message farther than ever before. Brian Blount, the president of Union Seminary — he preached at my installation service here and has been a guest speaker here on other occasions — Dr. Blount says it this way: “This woman stands toe to toe with somebody she thought had the ability to control cosmic and demonic forces, and she challenges what he is saying. Now that’s power!” Dr. Blount says, “The power of a woman so determined to see her daughter’s life [changed for the better], she dares challenge the very system of salvation.”¹

I think that’s why this story is included in the gospel. Scholars and students and people in the pews have long wondered why this story made the cut. It paints Jesus in a rather unpleasant light. But I think Jesus ultimately sees something of himself in that woman. And if I understand the text, Jesus wants us to shout for transformation in our world the way she shouts for the transformation of her daughter’s world, even when all the signals say you ought to shut up, give up, and go home. If she could stand up to Jesus, the gospel seems to be saying, we ought to be able to stand up to anyone or anything else in all creation.

If this story makes you a little uncomfortable, you aren’t alone. It makes me a little uncomfortable. I’ve learned something

¹ Brian Blount in *Mark In Two Voices*. Dr. Blount’s insights about the text’s parallel passage helped shape this sermon.

though. Whenever a text makes me uncomfortable, that almost always means it's a text I really need to pay attention to, that it's a text that really has something to teach me.

The work of justice is rarely comfortable. By definition, justice is about confronting things the way they are and insisting they can be different. But you know changing "the way we've always done it" or "the way it's always been" is hard. It's hard in the church, and it's even harder in the halls of power.

I imagine you've heard of MORE Justice. Spelled out, it's the Midlands Organized Response for Equity and Justice. MORE Justice's purpose, in their own words, is for "congregations to work together to empower marginalized people and act powerfully to address serious, community-wide problems through direct action. We accomplish this by identifying a problem, doing research, educating the public, and publicly addressing the root causes of, and solutions to, poverty and injustice."

This year, MORE Justice addressed issues of affordable housing and gun violence, and made progress toward the creation of an affordable housing trust fund that will use local public money to support additional affordable housing here in Richland County. Shandon has long had individual members participate, but this year we joined as a covenant congregation. I am grateful for the way so many of you have embraced this effort. In talking with some of the MORE Justice leaders, I learned that one of the obstacles they face is individuals and congregations who support the overall effort, but dislike the direct and public approach of talking with local officials and holding them accountable. It's uncomfortable. It is.

I think the Canaanite woman would have been a member of MORE Justice. And do you remember how Jesus ultimately responds to her? He doesn't get angry. He doesn't chastise her behavior or take a defensive posture. "Great is your faith," he says to her, and I

imagine he says it with a small but proud smile on his face. Because she shouts for the right to eat just a few crumbs of bread, but in so doing, she devours complacency. She chews up the timid desire to hide behind safe tradition. She swallows the temptation to be nice and polite instead of passionate and persistent. She consumes any loyalty to the way it's always been done. She gobbles up the fear of creating tension, she wolfs down the anxiety of wondering what people will think, and she finishes off the idea that silence might be considered neutral.

I don't normally share with y'all too much about what goes on in my head when I'm writing a sermon. (I think that's generally a good thing.) But for days now, every time I've thought about this woman, every time I sat down to write these words, a song ran through the back of my mind: the great 80s power ballad by Tears for Fears.

I know, I know. I've just dated myself terribly, and I think anyone whose ever endorsed my preaching might be recanting right now, but you know the one I mean, don't you? You know the words — at least some of you do. *Shout. Shout. Let it all out. These are the things I could do without. Come on. I'm talking to you. Come on.*

It was a song written to encourage political and social engagement. And it's not hard to imagine the Canaanite woman, or even Jesus himself, singing it ... at least, if you focus on the words and ignore the synthesizer. Because racial profiling, age discrimination, and women earning 82 cents for every dollar a man earns? These are the things we could do without.

Lack of access to health care, shame around mental health, and food deserts not far from this very Sanctuary? These are the things we could do without.

Gun violence, domestic violence, violence against the LGTBQ community? These, too, are the things we could do without.

So shout. The Canaanite woman shouts in the face of injustice, refusing to give up until she is heard, and Jesus praises her faith. It's a turning point in Matthew's gospel and Jesus' ministry. If you want anything to change, they seem to be telling us, shout. When the world is not as it should be, when the situation in front of you does not align with the kingdom of heaven, do not be quiet or complacent. Be a Canaanite. Who knows? Your voice could be a turning point for us all.