

## Drawing a Bigger Circle

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on August 16, 2020

Friendship Presbyterian Church

*Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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." 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." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. (Matthew 15:21-28, NRSV)*

Can you believe that a new academic year, a new program year, is starting? Here in Athens and all around the country, it's "Back to School" time, in one form or another – in-person, online, or some hybrid of the two. Of course, there's a lot of anxiety about all this given our circumstances right now, but there is – regardless – something about this season that will always remain exciting too.

It's natural in any time for young people to feel uneasy about a new year, but that unease often gives way to enthusiasm ... old patterns of last year get replaced with new routines ... older friendships change (sometimes fade, sometimes grow deeper), while new BFF's emerge ... whole new areas of learning burst into view that were not even conceivable before.

While this process is not usually easy or comfortable, it offers the invaluable experience of being stretched, challenged, pushed to see new things, and in this, our circle of knowing and imagination gets bigger and bigger. This is what growing up is all about.

In our gospel text for this morning, we encounter Jesus on the road, in Gentile territory, after having had a run-in with the Pharisees over what truly contaminates someone in the sight of God. Is it the foods we eat? The rituals we don't perform? Or is it the thoughts and actions which arise from the heart?

Already at this early point in Jesus' ministry, we see him leading his followers away from the notion that God's acceptance of us hinges on our adherence to ancient rites and dietary restrictions, as if God cares as much about you having pepperoni on your pizza as about how you treat your neighbors.

Just then, a strange woman appears and approaches Jesus and his disciples with a gut-wrenching request – she begs Jesus to deliver her daughter from a "demon," a condition which today we might diagnose as a severe mental illness. But whether we go with an ancient or modern framing of the problem, it's one the disciples want nothing to do with!

To be fair, this sort of thing had to be pretty alarming – the sort of cry for help that if it came to *your* front door, you might pretend you're not home and hope they give up and move on. And so, the disciples in distress go to Jesus and urge him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." But notice: They only have to do this because Jesus *himself* is ignoring her!

What most of us don't realize, until we come to this passage, is that to this point in his ministry – for all his radicalism – Jesus still understands his work to be principally about his own people. In this, he could hardly be blamed. Is it not his *own* people whom God chose to be a light to the world? Is it not his own people to whom God made special promises, and in whose history God intervened for grand purposes? Is it not his own people who suffered the most at the hands of their Roman oppressors?

Jesus can't help but notice who this woman is, or where she comes from. He can no doubt tell by her appearance, her speech, perhaps her clothes, that she is not one of the *chosen* people, not one of *his* people. But she continues incessantly on. And so, Jesus finally responds, saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she persists, even falling before him, begging him, "Lord, help me!"

It's here that Jesus says one of the most disturbing things to our ears that is recorded in all the New Testament. He answers her, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Yes, you heard that right. It certainly sounds like Jesus calls her a dog. Jesus' native people at this point in history generally took a pretty dim view of foreigners, of outsiders. Understanding themselves as divinely chosen but also deeply conscious of their oppression at the hands of others, their circle of moral imagination, of compassion, was mostly limited to their own people.

And up to this point in his mission, there is at least some indication that Jesus joins them in this – or at least, that the foreigners are not on his radar. Not that he didn't care at all, but up to this point, maybe they really do seem more like intrusions into an already loaded schedule ... like inconvenient people in need ... like abstractions.

Now, of course, it's possible that – all along – Jesus has every intention of delivering the woman's daughter ... that his apparent insult is a joke, or perhaps better, a *test* to see how she would react, a slow pitch right over home plate, allowing her the opportunity to show what she was made of.

This generous interpretation *is* possible, and many interpreters over the centuries have understood the story just this way – I suspect less from a straight, common-sense reading of the text and more out of a noble desire to make Jesus come off better.

We *know* the disciples feel negatively towards her. But is it possible that Jesus himself hadn't explored this ground either? Did he really grow up in a Galilean village, work in his father's carpentry shop for years, go to school and synagogue, and yet somehow escape having thoughts and feelings which were completely normal for his time and place? I'm not so sure. "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." He *does* say this, and it's not easy to explain away:

Honestly, I don't know what to make of it, but whatever he intended, he sets this woman up perfectly for one of the truly great comebacks of all time: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." BOOM!

And you know the best thing of all? You can *hear* the enthusiasm {and maybe even surprise} in Jesus' response! I can only imagine the look on his face as he answered her: "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And the daughter was healed instantly.

I imagine the disciples too were amazed – and *changed*. In time, they too would learn that openness of spirit which could hear a voice of guidance and re-direction – even if that voice speaks with the foreign accent of a feisty woman – and they would never be the same.

Just as surely as they could remember childhood joys of new discoveries, they soon could see something even more, even greater than they had seen before: That God's sovereign love is restricted by nothing, and has no boundaries – certainly no boundaries which *we* would put up. Their circle of compassion would get drawn bigger and bigger and bigger.

It was in the few years following 9/11 that I experienced one of the great course interventions in my own life, a time for me in which my own circle of compassion got bigger and wider. It was a shift I could never have foreseen, but one for which I will always be grateful.

It was the Fall of 2004, and I was considering ideas for some educational events at my church that would have the community in mind. I had just finished a series on *The Da Vinci Code* over that summer with great success, and it was suggested that we follow it with a series on Islam. The events of the past few years had forced it on us. We knew that there was both a genuine desire on the part of many to learn more about it, as well as much prejudice, fear, and misunderstanding that needed a level-headed Christian response.

So, I drew up plans for a six-week study. It was certainly not going to be a "hatchet job" on Islam, only pointing out and criticizing its deviations from Christianity, but I also didn't want to go the "politically-correct" route and ignore those differences either.

But here's the funny thing: In all this study and preparation, and then promotion, of a series to put Christianity into dialogue with another religion of enormous importance, I missed one little detail. It never occurred to me at any point – in all that time – to invite a single Muslim to participate, speak, or attend the presentations!

Now, perhaps I could be excused on the grounds that I didn't *know* a single Muslim. I *did* know that Muslims are a diverse lot, on a person-by-person basis no more likely to be "bad" than "good" than those who call themselves Christians – contrary to the fear-mongering pushed in so many quarters. So that sort of thing didn't play into it. *It just – honest to God – never entered my mind.* Perhaps, for me, Muslims were *abstractions*, not *people*.

Opening night for the class series came and the church sanctuary was packed with more than sixty people just a few minutes before the scheduled beginning. I was thrilled that it was getting so much response, and I was pumped by the energy of the crowd.

But then, my enthusiasm faced a test. I looked to the back of the room and I saw five or six obviously Middle Eastern men coming into the Sanctuary. Now, I shouldn't repeat here the *first* words that came to my mind in that moment. But getting over the initial reaction, my mind went to natural questions: Who are these men? How did they find out about this? What are they going to think, or say? It dawned on me, for the first time, that I, as a *Christian* minister, was about to lecture on the essential beliefs and practices of another religion, that at least some in the audience held dear. I hadn't counted on that.

But the show had to go on, and go on it did. It went *wonderfully*. I made my presentation, didn't run overtime, and had time to field questions. One of the Middle Eastern visitors asked a question, but it was just for clarification on one point I made, and he seemed satisfied with my answer. When this Q & A time was over, I thanked everyone for coming and encouraged them to return next week. Several people then came up and thanked me for the presentation and/or had a simple comment or question. It was a good time of visiting with the attendees.

But the people I was most interested in were patient and waited, and after the others had had a moment with me, they finally walked up, in turn shook my hand, and congratulated me on the class and complimented me on the lecture. They explained that they were Turkish, were Muslim, and that they were affiliated with the Istanbul Center for Culture and Dialogue, whose office was then located in Norcross. Somehow, immediately, I felt at ease. They had learned of the class from one of their companions who drove past my church on the way to his office every day, saw the class notice that we had placed on the marquee outside, and then passed on word.

We spent the next 30 minutes talking, sharing, and laughing about one thing or another. I can't explain what happened. I just know that by the time they left, these men of another faith, with foreign accents, felt like old friends ... a group of gracious, loving people I still am proud to call my friends today.

And their influence has stayed with me, of course, in a still more unique way. Several months after this night, these new friends invited me to join an all-expense paid guided tour of their native Turkey, organized by the Istanbul Center, and it was on that trip that I met another traveler, a young woman named Lisa Hudgins, destined a year later to become Lisa Buchanan.

As I reflect on that fateful night in the church sanctuary, it almost felt like going back to school as a boy ... walking into the unfamiliar, but gradually learning something new ... and meeting new kids, who would soon become – next to my family – the most important part of my world.

But this night was more than just about making new friends. When those men arrived that night, they were *strangers* to me, foreigners. But by the time they left, I knew that something had changed ... something in *me* had changed. I hadn't even *thought* of them or their sort when I planned a series about the single most important thing in their lives. People of their faith simply weren't on my moral or spiritual radar. But suddenly, that changed. I found that my heart had let them in.

My circle had just been drawn larger, but not just that, even. My understanding of God and of what God cares about and *who* God cares about had just gotten larger too. Oh sure, I had always believed that "God loves everyone," but that night, such words took on new meaning. It wasn't abstract. It wasn't something I had gotten from a book, or adopted because it was "politically correct." It was the unbounded love of God – *alive* and *active* and *real* – once again re-drawing and enlarging circles of compassion and care. This work of God is who God *is*.

It's this God ... the God of love, the God of Jesus Christ ... who is calling today, who would lead us to discover in our own lives the miracle of indifference giving way to concern, and concern giving way to compassion. In a world so full of division and fear, of deaf ears and stone hearts, the Spirit would guide us into so much more.

This is a work of *God*. We can't just make ourselves feel something that we don't. But we can let the winds of the Spirit pick us up and allow that flow to take us places we might not otherwise go. We do this when we *want* to stop listening, but don't ... when we *want* to ignore another's needs, but instead serve ... when we're afraid, but we step forward in obedience and trust. In these troubled times, we do this when we approach any moment as one to give ourselves over to the Divine, and let the God of Love *be* God in *us*.

To the glory of God. Amen.