Jesus, and us, letting go

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
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The story of the Jesus' encounter with the Syrophoenician woman (in Matthew she is described as a Canaanite woman, for our purposes, this is a wink of the storyteller's eye to us, saying that this woman is an "outsider" and Gentile). Talking about the harsh words of Jesus to this woman can become a sensitive topic in some Christian circles. It is a rather abrupt conversation that seems to exhibit racist tendencies in Jesus. To suggest that Jesus might not have been perfect can rankle more than a few Bible scholars.

Traditional scholars tend to dig into the arguments around Jesus' choice of words – suggesting that his word for "dog" (as in the woman's ethnic group analogous to "dogs") can actually mean a cute puppy rather than a common and unclean one dog. Others say that Jesus was testing the woman's resolve, thus the abrupt language. All to preserve the perspective that Jesus did not fall short of our modern standards of proper decorum.[1]

Diana Butler Bass, a theologian who is not afraid to jump into honest theological debate, is of the opinion that Jesus, a male Jew in ancient times, was formed in the values of his time.[2] After all. (my metaphor) Jesus breathed the air, the values, and the culture of Judaism in his time. He was formed by Jewish values, even as, many times, he showed that he could transcend the harmful aspects of his culture.

Many Gospel stories show how Jewish attitudes marginalized women, people of certain social standing, people who were not deemed unclean. Consider the marginalization that still happens in our modern times within certain Christian communities today – how often have we historically treated people of the LGBTQ2+ community, former inmates wanting to find a church home, and certain denominations that still prevent women from sharing their gifts in worship leadership.

To give a concrete example of Jewish values of Jesus' time, Butler Bass describes an essential prayer that Jewish men prayed in ancient time, a prayer that surely Jesus would have heard, and, even himself prayed, it is "The Prayer of Three Blessings":

> Blessed art thou who did not make me a Gentile,
> Blessed art thou who did not make me a woman,
> Blessed art thou who didn't make me an uneducated man.[3]

Thankfully, Judaism has wisely changed this Prayer in order to reflect changing values in the world, and in the Jewish faith. You might notice, though, this Syrophoenician

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[1] For an example of such an argument, see "Did the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7 teach Jesus not to be racist?" by Ian Paul, August 31, 2021, https://www.psephizo.com/.

[2] Diana Butler Bass, The Cottage. That Time Jesus Called a Woman "Dog", found at https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/sunday-special-f8f

[3] To learn more about the Three Blessings from a Jewish perspective, visit this article by Yehudah Mirsky, "Three Blessings
Why does the daily liturgy thank God for not making you a Gentile, slave, or a woman?"
https://www.myjewishlearning.com/

woman would not have been perceived positively through the Three Blessings lens: she is a Gentile, she is a woman, and she would have been assumed by a Jew to be uneducated. Jewish peers of Jesus would have prayed regularly how thankful they were not to have been created like her. Maybe Jesus was very human. But could we not relate to him as we struggle with our own prejudices?

Give Jesus credit, he *does* acknowledge her. He is breaking with the decorum expected of a Jewish Rabbi by simply talking with her! He also credits her chutzpah, her defiance wins him over, gaining renewed health for her daughter.

Did you notice that he healed the daughter remotely? A hint at an ancient version of Zoom healings.

Revealed to us in this Bible story, bigotry is embedded into ancient Judaism towards Gentiles, "Othering" that happened, and how Jesus may have taken on some of these prejudices. But, does this story fundamentally challenge our understanding of Jesus? Do you need to believe that Jesus is beyond reproach in order to be a modern-day follower? Or, can we accept that, as our Christian Tradition has asserted time and again, that Jesus was indeed very human? He loved, he was hurt, he grieved and wept, and, maybe, he made mistakes, but he too learned.

Today's story invites us to ask ourselves: What are ways in which we have grown, and how we have unlearned prejudices in the course of our life stories? I'll start the ball rolling – when I was a young, white, man in university, I held some very sexist views of women. Hopefully I have let go of some of those harmful opinions thanks to the work of strong women chiselling away at my walls. Anyone else want to share how you or perhaps we as a culture have unlearned prejudices over the years? (invite responses)

Jesus' disciples urged him to ignore the Syrophoenician woman. Notice that, yet again we are talking about a woman without a name in a Gospel story. Jesus did not ignore her, though. He was open to her challenge, and because she refused to let him leave the encounter without healing her daughter, he gave her what she demanded.

Stories like this one leave me struggling to translate their meaning for people who are not steeped in church – those who know little of the Bible tradition but who judge it as irrelevant. Unfortunately, we (me included), try to justify away the problems of some Bible stories like this one instead of being honest – Jesus was not perfect, but he learned. He had to let go of prejudices of his time as we do today. We have so much more work to do in our world that requires us to let go of our stubbornly held opinions – modern-day bigotry on the rise, sexism, anti-Semitism being major examples. Political polarization that has nurtured extremism not just in the United States, but here in Canada. Climate Change that threatens our creature comforts that we want to enjoy, so some governments try to appease our lifestyle needs, rather than making hard choices that could stem the tide of climate change, and the disproportionate consequences it has on the most vulnerable populations in the world.

If we hold Jesus to have been God's Beloved, but very much human – one who was steeped in his cultural biases – we can also see that he, a privileged male, evolved, broke through privileged barriers of his time, and listened when people challenged his biases. Most, perhaps all, around him – privileged and oppressed – bought into the

skewed value systems of his time, hanging onto those values for fear that losing them would threaten their social standing.

But Jesus' vision of God's kin-dom called him to be present with people, even those who threatened his comfortable assumptions. All the while, those closest to him urged him to avoid these difficult conversations. Maybe this is our call, too – to engage with people who trigger in us our own stubborn prejudices, talk with them enough to be challenged and sometimes transformed. Maybe *this* is the Jesus that we are being invited to follow – the Jesus who not only preaches about repentance and transformation, but a Jesus who himself is willing, publicly, to change.

Where is that humility in our world today? Where are the people of public profile who are willing to admit that they were wrong? People in power willing to change their attitudes and behaviours when they are challenged publicly. I have a great deal to learn. How about you? For me, it is when I'm supposed to be leading, and another person publicly challenges me. I get defensive. Instead of listening, really hearing the person's concern, I don't practice what I preach – I will not be as respectful as I should be, I will not take a beat, a thoughtful moment, before I open my mouth. I have a hunch that you have things you need to let go of, to unlearn, in your life too.

Let us not rationalize away these Biblical stories. Rather, let us embrace them, embrace the humility they teach us, and the lesson about unconditional love that they invite us to embrace. Amen.