

“When Jesus Changed His Mind”

Matthew 15:21-28

19th Sunday after Pentecost

October 16, 2022

Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

In our text for today, Jesus is on a mission.

And it’s the only reason I can think of for why Jesus says what he says, and does what he does.

When a Canaanite woman shouts after him, and approaches Jesus, and begs Jesus to heal her daughter, how does Jesus respond?

Upon hearing the woman shout after him, Jesus ignores her.

Then he tells his disciples that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

And then, most disturbing of all, he tells the woman that it’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.

Anyone else want to come up and preach on why Jesus says what he says in this text?

The only reason I can think of for that kind of response from Jesus is that Jesus is on a mission.

And let’s be clear from the outset.

I don’t believe for one second that Jesus thought this woman was a dog. I do believe that Jesus had a very particular understanding, at this point in his life and in his ministry, of why God sent him.

What his mission needed to be.

You see, Jesus is on a mission this morning.

And that mission is the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

God has sent him to seek out and serve his own people.
And nothing needs to interrupt him from that mission.

Jesus is on a mission in our text, but even a casual reading of this text tells us that Jesus is not the only person in this story who's on a mission. The Gentile mother of the daughter who is tormented by a demon...this mother is ALSO on a mission.

She wants her daughter healed.
She will stop at nothing to try to save her daughter.

And what happens when these two people, Jesus and this unnamed mother, each with their own mission—what happens when they come face to face?

Well there's some tension, right?
The woman falls before Jesus, kneeling.
Stopping him from proceeding on his mission.
The woman begs Jesus—you must help my daughter.
Jesus says no, I can't give the children's food to the dogs.
The woman replies that even dogs receive food that fall from the master's table.

In other words, in the woman's view of the world, in this woman's view of God's compassion, there's enough food, enough love, enough grace to go around for everyone.

And Jesus...is...astonished.
Great is your faith, your daughter is healed.

According to the text, Jesus changes his mind about healing this mother's daughter.

Why does he change his mind?

According to our text, it's the faith of this mother—
this view that God's grace is there for everyone,
that God's love claims everyone...that moves Jesus so.

And what's fascinating to me about this story is that it's not just
the mind of Jesus that changes.

It's his mission.

Let's take a step back and do a little Bible study for just a moment.
If you go to chapter 10 in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus sends the
twelve disciples on a mission.

Do you remember that mission?

Jesus says to them:
“Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the
Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

That's the mission that Jesus gives to his disciples in chapter 10.
Did you hear the echo with our story today?

The same language is used.
Jesus describes his mission, in our text, the same way.

Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel—that's chapter 10.
I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel—that's
chapter 15.

So if our text for today says that Jesus grew in his faith, if Jesus could understand his mission in a new way, and come to see God's love at work in a more expansive way...then what about you?

What about me?

Have you ever thought about this before?
When was the last time you asked yourself:
How does God want me to grow?

Whenever new members are joining our church, in the new member class, I like hearing from them about why they've attending our church.

They often say things like its our congregation's vision—Open Minds Open Hearts—that fits with their theology very well.

The often say that the traditional worship, and the beautiful music in worship, and the ministries that we have for our children, for our youth, that there's something for all ages here at Westminster—these are all reasons that they give for wanting to join our church.

And yet, I sometimes wonder if there's another reason, for our new members, a reason for their joining Westminster that runs deeper even than those reasons that they name out loud. I think sometimes what they're telling us is that Westminster...

is a place where they believe their faith in God will grow.

So may I make a couple suggestions about ways that all of us here at Westminster might be able to grow in our faith?

Suggestion number one: CURIOSITY.

I think all of us have room to grow in our curiosity for and about one another, and about our neighbors in God's world.

You've heard me describe Westminster as a purple church.
I hope it will always be that way.
But I also want us to be willing to go deeper than the color purple.

In my vision for our church, Westminster will be a church that values curiosity instead of criticism, so that even when we disagree with each other, we will respect each other and be curious about each other, and treat every person in this room—friend, stranger, visitor—as the child of God that they are.

Curiosity is a powerful force when it comes to growth...

Tara Westover, the author of the memoir *Educated*, grew up in Idaho working in her family's junkyard. She didn't go to school, never got a high school diploma, but she was smart enough to get accepted to college and then graduate school.

Reflecting on that transition, she says:

"I'm grateful that when people met me, when I went away to college, and was thinking a lot of crazy things...they did not [simply] express frustration at having found another person who was not the way they ought to be.

I had never heard of the holocaust, she said.
I had horrific ideas about gender and homophobia, she said.

And yet, she goes on:

[When I got to Cambridge]...

“The people I met did not just see me as a disappointment, but were...more interested in why are you like that, and you seem like an interesting person, tell me about how this set of beliefs fits with who you are...”¹

In other words, the people she met when she left for school...they were curious about her. They had an open mind and heart about her. And because they were curious and open instead of just being critical, Tara Westover was able to grow.

Let me ask you: how many of you remember Mr. Rogers?
Fred Rogers, the genius behind Mr. Rogers Neighborhood?
Fred Rogers had a saying that he loved to tell the children watching his show.

I like you just the way you are.
Now...I believe that's true.
Not just for Fred Rogers, but for God.

God loves each of us just as we are right now.
With all of our worries and warts and wonder.

And...if I can be so presumptuous as to add something to what Mr. Rogers said—God doesn't just love who we are right now.

God already DELIGHTS in the person whom God is calling each of us to be.

In other words, faith in God is not about staying stagnant.
Stuck in the mud.
Set in our ways.

¹ From Kate Bowler's interview with Tara Westover, on Dr. Bowler's podcast, "Everything Happens," April 12, 2022.

It's about growth.

Growth must always be a goal of our church, part of the vision of our church. Not just growth in numbers, but spiritual growth, creating a safe and stimulating and challenging culture here, where all of us can grow in our journeys with God, where we can grow collectively as a community that reflects the love of Christ.

And that requires COURAGE.
Not only curiosity, but courage.

It means staring down our deepest fears, stepping outside our comfort zones, and trusting that God will see us through whatever it is we're afraid of walking through.

Just think about the courage that it took for the mother in our text for today to do what she did.

I can't imagine she had done anything like that before.

In a world dominated by men, to challenge a popular Rabbi, and to say to him—I'm not stopping until you heal my daughter, because that's what God needs you to do!

No wonder Jesus was astonished.
You see, that Canaanite mother had a remarkable imagination about God, faith in God, trust in God!

A faith that God's love could overcome barriers of gender and culture, barriers of geography and religion.

The Canaanite mother believed that there is always more love, more light, more grace, more goodness in the heart of God than you and I can possibly imagine...and she acted on that belief!

And because she acted on that belief, I believe that Jesus grew. Just like you and I are called to grow.

You see, it is always a gift, when someone helps our imagination about God and what God is up to in our lives...to grow.

I remember when I was very early in my career, working as an associate pastor in Texas, and I had a very good senior pastor who served as a mentor to me in many ways.

On one occasion, I think we were driving to a Presbytery meeting together, and I was maybe a year or two into my call at that church, I asked him what he saw in me that perhaps I needed to work on, perhaps something I needed to change.

He looked at me for a moment—almost like he was wondering if I really wanted to hear his answer.

And then he said, “Ben, sometimes you just need to make a decision.”

What he had noticed in me was a tendency, sometimes, to sit on the fence, to wait, to not make a decision when I really needed to make a decision, even if it ended up being the wrong decision.

In other words, what he saw in me at that time was a fear of failure, a fear of making the wrong decision, which theologically is a fear of trusting that God’s grace was large enough to be at work, no matter what I decided.

And in my early years of ministry, his words helped me to grow.

A long time ago, a Canaanite mother crossed the path of Jesus, and I believe she spoke some words that helped Jesus to grow.

So if God sent someone to you today—
to step in your path, like that Canaanite mother stepped in Jesus' path long ago...and this person had something to say to you,
what do you think you need to hear,
in order for your faith to move from where it is right now...to where God wants it to be?

(Amen.)