

August 16th 2020

The 11th Sunday after Pentecost

Grace and Peace to you all from our God our redeemer and healer – Amen.

What would Jesus do?

It's a phrase you might remember from a cultural fad that swept across our nation in the 1990's. One-part fashion accessory, and one-part moral Sunday school lesson – these bracelets came to challenge Christians to think about what Jesus would do in their very situation.

And unlike other Christian fads of the day - this one, for whatever reason, seemed to catch on more widely than simply with those who attended church each Sunday. From NBA basketball stars, to politicians – everyone seemed to be wearing these little pieces of woven fabric at the time.

While these bracelets were a simple fashion statement, they also marked a counter cultural movement leading people of faith, and non-believers alike, to casually and openly ask questions about ethics, morality, and where God might be leading them in their life.

While we are no longer wearing these bracelets today – our gospel lesson seems to present this very question for us today – “What would Jesus do?”

And if we aren't paying close enough attention to the gospel lesson this morning, we might assume an appropriate answer at worst would be to say something harsh or at best would be to “do nothing”.

In our text from Matthew for this Sunday we are faced with one of the most racially charged, misogynistic, and oppressive moments of Jesus ministry recorded in the gospels.

After extolling his disciples on the importance of our words and our actions as a mark of our life as people of faith – Jesus – likely fueled by the norms of his own cultural and time has an exchange with a Canaanite woman begging for healing for her daughter that should make us all cringe.

Ignoring this woman's cries for help Jesus calls her, her daughter, and all Canaanite people dogs – an insult meant to punctuate the fact that Jesus believed “these people” were unfit for his or his disciples help or healing.

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Let that sink in for a minute.

Jesus calls them all dogs ... and likely even a harsher translation than that if you talk to some biblical Greek scholars.

What Jesus said that day is not right or okay to repeat.

The Canaanite woman was not a dog. Her people were not dogs. And by his words Jesus does not call us to practice denigrating human beings – ever - for any reason.

Even if the world tells us otherwise, there is no room left for churches, pastors, people of faith, or anyone for that matter - to sit on the sidelines as hate speech, racism, and white supremacy, and make an effort to return to a central place in our society and world.

So, I also feel called to join my voice with other church leaders and say: misogynistic threats and name calling are harmful and wrong. Similarly, Anti-Semitic threats against the Jewish community, Islamophobia attacks on Muslims, Racist assaults against People of Color, the disregard of First Nations communities, and harmful acts towards LGBTQ2SIA+ peoples are all equally destructive and wrong.

But all these are more than simply wrong in the eyes of God.

They are sinful and they are evil.

They all stand in direct opposition to the truth of the gospel we come together each Sunday to hear and experience - that everyone is loved, cherished, and created equal in the eyes of God.

Full stop.

Period.

Yet, with that having been said, we hear Jesus speak words to this woman and her daughter that are oppressive and deeply hurtful this morning.

At best they shine a light on the reality that Jesus was just as oblivious to the prejudices of his day as the rest of us can be now.

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At worst they reveal to us a less than perfect savior we have come to worship each and every Sunday.

And if the story ended here, we might be forced to rethink if we would be joining for church next Sunday – but luckily for us the Canaanite woman refuses to let Jesus or his disciples go without truly hearing about the injustice of her situation.

So, with all the strength and gumption she can muster she humbly responds to Jesus racist remarks by saying,

“Yes, Jesus. Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

And with that Jesus turns to truly acknowledge this woman and her daughter for perhaps the first time.

With her painful, yet determined cry, this unnamed Canaanite woman demands to be seen, heard, and recognized as a child of God. And through her persistence, she teaches Jesus something about himself and his mission that is crucial for him to learn before leaving this scene.

That God’s love calls each of us to break down every barrier that could ever be conceived – even if it means painful self-examination to truly see how we have actively and passively hurt another human being.

And so in the center of this troubling exchange we witness Jesus model a way forward for us when we find ourselves holding up painful prejudices – whether we mean to or not.

A way forward that allows us to learn, repent, and find healing, while also acknowledging the dignity and needs of those who are oppressed. An act that gives us all hope that God is still working in, with, and through us to make this world a more just and equitable place. Because that is what God has shown us through the life and ministry of Christ.

And so perhaps the question before us this morning not what would Jesus do?

But what will we do?

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It is my prayer that this question would rest, and be wrested within our hearts today.

That Christ would grant us the courage to turn back, acknowledging our wrongs, and truly see those we have left behind.

That God would grant us the grace to try again, and again, and again, when we fail to see the innate beauty and worth of every created being.

And that the Holy Spirit would move and breath within us all to truly see one another as beloved children of God.

Loved.

Cherished.

And called to welcome everyone with open arms.

And it is my prayer that may this be so among us – Amen.