

Pentecost 14 - Proper 15A
St. David's

This past Wednesday, I had a very surprising visit from a woman I did not at first recognize. But as soon as she began her story, I quickly remembered everything. It seems that she, let's call her Sally, had visited St. David's once, two and a half years ago. The event that Sally attended was one of our Passover Seders. When she came to that Passover, as Sally recalled for me, she brought a guest with her. The guest was someone many of us knew, a local resident who was suffering with cancer, whom we had been trying to assist through our food pantry and our financial aid office.

While many of us had met Sally's guest previously, let's call her Beverly, we had never seen her in quite the form she was that night. Beverly was rip roaring, off the wall, boisterously drunk. Those of you who were there, probably also remember in some detail how Beverly bellowed out each Jewish prayer at the top of her lungs, a full half sentence behind the rest of us. I particularly recall Beverly embellishing the Hebrew text with her own words, yelling out for us to PRAISE JEEEEESUS, right there in the middle of the most important Jewish ceremony of the year. You may also recall that at this point during that Seder, I not so inconspicuously switched the table's wine bottle to grape juice.

The reason Sally visited me on Wednesday was to tell me how mortified she was by Beverly's actions. She was so humiliated by the event that it had taken her all of these years to get the courage to come in and apologize. She came to ask for your forgiveness that it happened at all and also for her poor judgement in not immediately removing Beverly from the premises.

I thanked Sally profusely for coming, but also told her there was no need to apologize. “When we say everyone is welcome at St. David’s,” I said, “we really do mean everyone.”

My question this morning is this. Is what I told Sally true? Do we really embrace everyone at St. David’s? Because the more I thought about it, the more I realized that I was embarrassed that night by Beverly’s actions. We had gone to great lengths to not offend our Jewish guests by removing every Christian symbol from our church, so that they would have the opportunity to preside over a true Hebrew Seder. And then this drunk woman goes nuts and starts yelling out the name Christ every few minutes. As I analyzed my reaction that night, I realized that Beverly had broken my purity code. Her actions had, in my mind, polluted a sacred ceremony. So while I talk a really good game about inclusion and acceptance, when I am honest with myself, I too have my sanctity lines, and when someone goes beyond them, I am upset and embarrassed.

It is very easy to talk about the horrors of purity codes when we are speaking in a general sense or when we look at past events. Purity codes have created incredible levels of suffering throughout the world’s history. There are thousands of examples, but none any better than Hitler’s vision of a pure blonde white race and what people did to others to live into that purity code. It’s so easy to look at one of these examples of someone else’s exclusion of another in the name of purity and clearly see its offensive nature. Even biblical fundamentalists will readily see how the purity codes in Leviticus and Deuteronomy caused the early Hebrews to exclude “the other” from their midst, taking away their dignity

and forcing them into a life of shame and emptiness. It is so easy to see now the separation of blacks from whites in this country for nearly 200 years and now recognize it as racism. But it is not so easy to recognize that we too have our purity codes and that we too continue to separate others from ourselves, because we believe we will be harmed by having them in our midst. That is how I responded to Beverly at our Seder. As the confession we will say in a few minutes reminds us, “we mouth liberation, but we live oppression.”

Our normal course at this juncture would be to ask the theological question that has now become so popular that people are wearing it on wristbands and rings. WWJD. What would Jesus do? How, we ask, does Jesus avoid the trap of just talking about the dangers of the purity code without recognizing those dangers in his own life? We would then look at today’s Gospel, whereupon we would have an epiphany when we hear how Jesus handles this situation perfectly.

Only today, when we ask what would Jesus do, we are quite shocked to learn what Jesus really did. He seems to do the same thing all of us do. Here he is all high and mighty, beginning the Gospel by talking about the dangers of his religion’s purity code. He talks about people being more concerned with cleaning their hands than their hearts. But Jesus, like us, cannot seem to take his own words and practically apply them to his real life situation. Because right in front of him stands this Canaanite woman, who by nature of her race and sex, is the extreme example of someone who has been segregated by the purity code. But instead of welcoming her and including her as we are waiting for him to do, Jesus also excludes her from their company. In fact, not only is he exclusive, but he is

downright abusive. First, he ignores her, making believe she is not even there. When that doesn't work, he invokes the Hebrew purity code directly, telling her he can't help her because she isn't Jewish. Finally, when that still doesn't dissuade her, he insults her, calling her a dog. There is also a strong chance we are missing the gravity of this insult, because the Greek word used for dog here is feminine, and we all know how that should be translated into English.

Last week, Kathalin had the unenviable task of dealing with a Jesus that is so perfect, so divine, that he is described by Matthew as doing something that we know is scientifically impossible. Today, we have the exact opposite scenario. What do we do with a Jesus who calls women names and sounds very much like a racist and a bigot?

I have heard and read Biblical commentators desperately attempting to preserve Jesus's perfection by implanting all sorts of explanations why Jesus behaves so poorly in today's story. One of those methods is to say that what he is doing is participating in what we now refer to as tough love, suggesting that he is forcing the Canaanite woman to stand up for herself. I find such arguments unlikely and unreasonable, especially in light of the fact that Jesus is not just forceful with the Canaanite women, he is disparaging. He uses an ethnic slur to refer to her, very similar to an Anglo today calling an African American the "n" word.

It seems to me that the power of today's Gospel is impossible to discern until we begin by acknowledging that, yes, Jesus is a real son of a gun today. He acts as human as all of us. He does so because, like us, he cannot make the

connection between the point he has just made and the person standing in front of him. If Jesus was right and that it is not what you eat that makes you impure, but rather what comes out of your mouth, then it follows that it is not someone's race, or culture or religion that makes them impure, but rather how they live their lives. But Jesus cannot make any such connection. Why? Because since he was knee high to a grasshopper, he has heard that Canaanites were less than human, that they were ritually unclean. That is why to this point in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus continues to insist that his ministry is only to the Jews. In fact, today is the first time in this Gospel that Jesus ventures past his home territory and out into the dangerous world of the Gentiles. And immediately upon doing so, here he is assaulted by one of those Gentiles, not unlike the assault some of us felt when Beverly polluted our Seder ceremony.

But instead of walking away from Jesus when he verbally assaults her, the Canaanite woman persists, turning Jesus's own logic on him. My gosh, she says to Jesus, "even dogs like me get to eat the crumbs from the table."

When she refers to herself in the same pejorative fashion Jesus has just used to describe her, Jesus suddenly sees the light. This woman, the loud boisterous one who has polluted the sacred nature of the Jesus mission, has just pointed out to Jesus that he is a hypocrite. The Canaanite woman calls Jesus on his bigotry. And here is the key. Instead of planning his next put down remark and not hearing what she says, Jesus stops...and listens to her. He suddenly realizes that she is absolutely right. She is being devalued because of his purity code.

I would suggest that today's hero is not Jesus, but rather one pushy Canaanite woman. But to his credit, Jesus is willing to consider another point of view, the point of view of a person he has been taught to ignore. For me, that is the most important lesson for us this morning.

Herein lies the answer to what we must do to avoid excluding others in our own life. Not only must we welcome everyone into our churches, homes and hearts with open arms, but we need to realize that it is the Canaanite women in our lives, the screamer at the Seder, the clinically insane person at the food pantry, the kid bouncing off the walls in church, the person sitting next to us who makes us nervous, these are the people who offer us the opportunity for epiphany in our lives. If Jesus, for heaven's sake, has a faith conversion by opening himself up to someone he has been taught to treat like a dog, imagine what could happen to you and me if we do the same.

When we do not try to make Jesus into something he is not in today's Gospel, this story has life changing implications. We realize that listening to people we consider impure, is no easy thing to do. Not even Jesus could do it initially. But it is exactly this action that has the power to bring healing to our own lives. It is our ability to welcome everyone and then listen to them that has the power to heal and grow our churches. Beyond all that, if we can start listening to the other, the outcast, the weirdo, we can end the terrible polarization that has plagued our country and our world, especially over the last 30 years. We can find common ground on every issue that divides us, if only we respect and listen to the Canaanite woman. Today's Gospel has the power to end the terrible rift in the

Anglican church and the Christian church, between Republicans and Democrats, Jews and Palestinians, Islamic fundamentalists and American capitalists. But to do so, we, like Jesus, must learn to embrace and listen to every Canaanite woman in our lives.

What would it look like, I wonder? If we really were able to erase all of our purity codes, I would call the resulting world the kingdom of God. That is what I believe Jesus meant when he told us the kingdom is within our grasp. But what would it be like? A recent quirky movie makes a stab at envisioning it.

Movie clip

I had no intention of watching *Lars and the Real Girl*. After all, where could a story about a guy and a sex doll possibly go, except there? But I urge you to get past that thought, because that's not what this story is about at all. The character of Lars, played by Ryan Gosling, is a painfully shy introvert, whose mother died in childbirth, whose father was emotionally absent his entire life and whose brother, who lives across the street, just wants Lars to disappear. Lars has been so segregated from any emotional comfort his entire life that he has strong physical pains when anyone touches him. Lars is the kind of guy who gets eaten alive in today's world because our purity code has taught us to segregate ourselves from him. I dare say if any of us met someone dating a piece of plastic, we probably would not invite them over to dinner or here to church.

But that is exactly what the people in Lar's community do. They live today's Gospel. Lars and his neoprene friend are asked out to parties and welcomed at church. In one sermon the pastor says, that Lar's girlfriend "has become one of

us. She is our teacher. She loves this town, and most of all, she loves Lars.” I don’t want to ruin the ending for you if you have not seen it, but suffice to know that not only does Lars heal, but so does the entire community in amazing ways.

The real question then, for all of this morning is this; Can we really be that kind of inclusive? Can we listen to the stupid and the crazy and learn from them? Could we pass the Peace to Latex Linda? Can we embrace the Canaanite woman?

When Jesus does it, his heart is changed forever. The same can happen to you and me. I don’t know about you, but that is an image of Jesus that I relate to, a Jesus who is challenged every day just like you and me. A Jesus who shares our humanity and is willing to admit that he was wrong and she was right. That is a savior I can emulate, a savior worth loving, a savior that truly can save me and the world. Amen.