

HEAR THE VOICES OF OTHERS

Matthew 15: 21-28

When I lived in Richmond, Virginia in my early elementary years, we learned from a book called *Virginia's History* and made a day field trip to Jamestown and Williamsburg. Jamestown, we learned, was inhabited by more than 14,000 individuals that were called "Powhatan Indians" after their chief Powhatan. One of the most famous Indian women was called, Pocahontas, who became interested in the colonists. This special woman, who was not then called a "Native American" was indigenous to this country. Colonists—most of whom were Caucasian men and women, were the refugees, coming to the shores of the new world escaping religious persecution. Although Pocahontas built some bonds with those who fled here for religious freedoms, the native American beliefs of polytheism (many gods,) were not honored by those who came to these seashores. They sought to change the religious beliefs of the indigenous people and they had little tolerance for their beliefs. There were certainly a few examples of peaceful exchanges, but the proof of the pudding was in native Americans being marginalized and rounded up to live on reservations, rather than living all over this great land where they practiced conservation long before it became a political football. It is said that these native people were called "Indians" because a confused Christopher Columbus thought that he had landed in a territory he thought was part of Africa called "The Indies." But those natives were the original inhabitants of this land as their land that was soon claimed by colonists who brought to these shores their beliefs in an organized government and in creating one nation under the Christian and Jewish God. Of course, the rest is history. People who look like me are not the natives of this land we know as America, yet my forebearers were the settlers and conquerors of this land. Even as recently as 1830, President Andrew Jackson and the Congress

approved the “Indian Removal Act,” naming lands west of the Mississippi as tribal reservations, moving native Americans off what was deemed the more desirable locations in the east. Mostly, the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants claimed it. It was not the first such move of its kind, nor would it be the last.

In a similar fashion, there were native people in the land we now know as Israel called “Canaanites,” because they lived in the land known as Canaan. They were polytheistic, that is, they believed in many gods, and the God in whom we believe in the Bible claimed that land for what were called the “chosen people.” So God sent Joshua into Canaan to conquer in, recorded in the Bible in the book of Joshua. He and the Israelites crossed the Jordan River and entered into Jericho and the surrounding areas. They conquered and claimed it for God the Lord, called “Yahweh.” But the natives of that land were either moved out of the land or slaughtered in its conquest. Later, Canaanites continued to live outside of the boundaries of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. One day ages and ages after Canaan was conquered by Israel, Jesus was a grown man living the region of the Galilee. We learned last week that Jesus was not one to be held back by geographic boundaries, so last week he went to Samaria, a place where no respectful Jew would go (remember: Jesus was a Jew,) and he lifted the spirits of the woman at the well. She became one of Jesus’ biggest advocates in her village. Now Jesus decides to travel north, to an area where some Canaanites still lived. There he met a woman who, I am convinced, changed Jesus’ thinking about to whom he was sent. Listen: This Canaanite woman—whose people would have no special knowledge about or allegiance to Jesus as “Lord” or Son of David,” has done her research. She needs a healing, and she knows how to ask for it. “Have mercy on me (mercy—unmerited favor) *Lord, Son of David*” she calls out. Jesus must have been intrigued but not moved yet. She said, “My daughter is tormented by a demon.” Jesus knew demons;

she may or may not have known that he knew demons; but she knows enough to recognize his power. His disciples try to move him away from her. And he answers what he has believed from his insights so far, "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" So Jesus believed he was only sent to Jews. Goodness; if we followed that line of thinking, followers of Jesus would only be sent to save either lost Christians; or people of the same ethnicity or the same sexuality or the same theology. Fortunately, the encounter goes on. She kneels; and in what I imagine is a pleading voice, cries to Jesus "Lord, help me." Here the still unmoved Jesus uses a pejorative term to describe her and her people. It stings to hear it: *It is not fair to take the children's food* (read here, the 'children of God') *and throw it to the dogs.* It's a motion of not just putting food on someone's plate but hurling it on the floor for mongrels to devour. And Jesus spoke those stinging words to a woman, but not an Israelite woman: so that made it ok?? To old school Jesus, yes. *But he was changed by his encounter with the woman at the well. And here he is changed even more. She speaks to him, not as a weakling but as one who challenges his beliefs.* "Yes, Lord, (notice that *she* is still respectful even if he isn't,) even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." *I believe this Canaanite woman changed the mind of Jesus.* Why? First, he said her faith was great and granted her request. But second, the man who in one breath says he was sent to save only the lost sheep of Israel makes one of his most famous proclamations just 13 chapters later. "*Go and make disciples of all nations.*" Matthew 28:19. *The Great Commission.* When did Jesus change his mind? Perhaps with the woman at the well; certainly with the Canaanite woman who was a native of that land. Who else? Jesus learned that his own people were suspicious of him and spread rumors about him. But people of other areas, like Mary of Magdala, like Bartimaeus the blind beggar, like the people in the land of a Gadarenes on the other side of the Sea of Galilee likely changed his mind about marginalized people too. Maybe he also learned it in Caesarea Philippi where

Canaanite beliefs were also practiced and there was—and still is—a cave called “The Gates of Hell.”

Who are the marginalized people of our day—the “others” who could change our minds about certain situations the way Jesus’s mind was changed? If you are Anglo, speaking with people who are “other” to you—like people of color—could help you understand just a bit of what it’s like to be them and the hinderances and hatred that they face. If you are straight, speaking with those who are other to you—perhaps LGBT or Q people—could help you understand just a bit of what it’s like to be them and the hinderance and hatred that they face. If you are able-bodied, speaking with those who are “other” to you—like people with disabilities—could help you understand just a bit of what it’s like to be them, and the hinderances and hatred that they face. If you have the comfort of citizenship, hearing from those who are called refugees—could help you understand the utter desperation in their own lives and the lives of their children, and the hinderances and hatred that they face. And if you are Christian, speaking with those who identify as other to you—like Muslims, or Hindus, or even agnostics—could help you understand a bit of what it’s like to be them. *Why should we dare to cross those lines into the lands of “the others?” Because, of course, we are following the example of our Lord Jesus, who crossed lines all the time, learning from those he met, and sometimes changing his way of thinking. Perhaps following Jesus is doing exactly that. Shall we risk changing our way of thinking by meeting others, as Jesus himself did?*

Let us pray: Help us to open our eyes and ears and hearts to those around us, those who feel invisible or hated. Help us to bring the love of Christ to others, who, after all, moved and changed the boundaries of his reach. Help us do that too. Amen.

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