

Words matter. What we say matters. This is something that has been on my heart and on my mind over the last week. The gospel text this morning begins with Jesus emphasizing this very truth. Jesus is yet again challenging the status quo. When he is challenged by some of the Jewish leaders about why the disciples don't follow the purity codes of the temple by washing their hands before eating, he responds that it isn't what goes in your mouth that defiles you or makes you unholy, but rather what comes out of your mouth. What we say matters. A person is not defiled by what goes in their stomach, but by that which originates in one's heart and is demonstrated in one's life. What we say and do is more important to God than what we eat or if we wash our hands. Then in the next moment, Jesus is approached by a woman asking and begging Jesus to heal her daughter. We would expect Jesus to use this opportunity to demonstrate with a real-life example to his disciples exactly what he was talking about. To show them what it looks like when what comes from your heart is love and grace. But instead when the woman approaches Jesus for help, what does he do? He completely ignores her. Silence. He offers her nothing.

But this woman is determined. She is persistent. The disciples ask Jesus to tell her to go away because she keeps shouting at them. This is the moment when we might expect Jesus to say "no, I will not send her away. Bring her to me" as he does in so many other stories. But he doesn't. Instead he basically tells her that because she isn't Jewish, she's not worth his time. But it's not just that she's not Jewish. The choice of word used to describe her matters. In verse 22 the author chooses to describe the woman as a "Canaanite." Usually when the author of Matthew's gospel describes someone who is not Jewish, he uses a term we translate as "gentile". But here Matthew chooses the word "Chanaanaïos" which is translated as Canaanite. This is the only time that the author of Matthew chooses to use this word when referring to a non-jewish person. The designation of "Canaanite" certainly defines the woman as a gentile, but not just any gentile. There were no Canaanites living during Jesus' time, so the label does not describe present-day encounters. It is the name of the ancient inhabitants of Palestine before its conquest by the Israelites. The term conveys deep-seated historical

biases. The label evokes historical conflicts and thus defines the woman in terms of age-old prejudices a first-century Jewish audience would understand.¹

There is an entrenched cultural racism in this story and it is coming from the mouth of Jesus! Jesus may be the son of God but he is also a Nazarene. A human being who grew up in a particular time and place who inherited the cultural prejudice that existed in his family and his community. So when the woman continues to push Jesus, he responds by calling her a dog. This word matters too. The relationship people had with dogs 2000 years ago was not the same as it is today. They didn't buy them cute little outfits or call them their "fur babies." Some dogs were domesticated, but most dogs were scavengers. This is not a term of endearment. Dogs were unwelcome, persistent pests that were hard to scare away. This is exchange is shocking to those of us who think of Jesus as welcoming and loving all God's children. But it is made even more so when we recall what Jesus was JUST teaching. Our words matter. What comes from our heart matters. Is it just me or does Jesus sound a bit like a hypocrite?

But nevertheless, she persisted. This woman who has been called a dog by someone whom she has only shown reverence and respect, by someone she has called Lord. When Jesus compares healing her daughter to taking food out of the mouths of hungry children and throwing it to the dogs, she is not deterred. "Even dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their masters' table." She keeps shouting. She won't go away. And it seems that something in Jesus shifts. Her words change him. This unnamed Gentile woman is unafraid to speak truth to power. She calls Jesus out on his prejudice and demands that he see her, that he listen to her, that he change his mind. Jesus did not initially look upon this woman with compassion like he did the thousands of people he just fed with 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread. But he was open to listening to her point of view. He was open to changing his perspective and challenge his own assumptions and inherited prejudices. Words matter, and this woman's words changed Jesus' understanding of who was part of his community.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=125

We all have assumptions about who is part of our community. We tend to think about community in narrow and homogenous terms. Community means people who are like us. Right? But I think in this text, we are challenged, as Jesus was, to expand our understanding of who is part of our community.

I wonder how Jesus' ministry might have looked differently if the Canaanite woman had allowed Jesus' insults to shut her up. If her shouting had stopped and she had allowed Jesus' prejudice to go unchecked. If she had decided to give up, and instead of persisting, she decided to push down her anger and frustration by going home and eating a sheet cake. And if you haven't seen the video of Tina Fey and the sheet cake, it is hilarious, but it's not the best advice for seeking justice in the world. This woman shouted courageously and continued to engage with Jesus until he changed his mind, and his ministry from that day forward. By naming the inequality she was experiencing at the hands of Jesus, she not only saved her daughter, but she completely changed how Jesus interpreted his purpose.

The gospel of Jesus was no longer only a messiah for the people of Israel, but a message of hope and grace and love for all the nations of the world. The community of Jesus' ministry went from people who worshiped and prayed and dressed just like him, to an expansive and diverse people of all colors.

Our words matter and how we define community matters. This weekend we witnessed community at its best. Right here in Brainerd, we organized a local response to the white supremacy and violence that was on full display in Charlottesville, Virginia last week. As a dozen or so of us gathered in the church basement we named that our hope was to bring the entire breadth and depth of the Brainerd community together to unite against racism and hate. We hoped that the words we chose made it clear that the gathering was for everyone who wanted to name the injustice of white supremacy regardless of political affiliation, or faith tradition. The community that gathered on Friday night included people who identified as democrats, republicans, libertarians, and independents. We had participants as young as 4 years old and as old as 80+. It wasn't perfect of course. Although a few people of color participated, the gathering was

predominantly white folks and everyone in the leadership was white. This is partially because that's who lives here but it is also because we still have work to do with regards to expanding our own definitions of community.

We also witnessed a drastic shift in Boston this weekend. A planned white supremacy rally that was billed as a Free Speech rally, was met with approximately 40,000 people shouting for inclusion and love. Friends of mine who were present in that community of people reported that the turnout of white nationalists and white supremacists was miniscule compared to what was expected. They estimated that fewer than 100 people showed up in support of white supremacy. The persistent shouts from the thousands gathered on the side of love made it impossible for the small group of racists to go on with their event as planned. Their shouts of inclusion drowned out the the voices of hate. Their words mattered.

Like the Canaanite woman's daughter, this country also suffers from a metaphorical demon possession. Racism and white supremacy are demons that will not go away willingly or easily. And so we must keep shouting for healing. We must keep shouting for love naming injustice and prejudice and refuse to go away quietly. But like Jesus, we must also listen to those who are at the heart of the suffering, the ones who are directly impacted by racism and white supremacy and follow their lead. Our understanding of our community has to expand. This is something I am continually working on, reflecting on, and striving to improve within myself and on behalf of our church.

Friends I am filled with hope after the unbridled displays of resistance to white supremacy this weekend. Our words matter, our sense of community matters and our resistance, persistence, and vigilance matter. And if a Canaanite woman is capable of changing the mind of the son of God, imagine what else is possible when we name injustice and proclaim love in its place. May it be so.