

Don't You Tell Me No

Matthew 15: 21-28

On Election Day in 1960, four unanswerable questions awaited Clarence Gaskins, a Black voter in Georgia looking to cast his ballot for president. Upon arrival at his designated polling place, he was ushered into a room that held a jar of corn, a cucumber, a watermelon, and a bar of soap. He was informed that in order to vote, he first had to answer the following correctly: "How many kernels of corn are in the jar? How many bumps on the cucumber? How many seeds in the watermelon? And how many bubbles in the bar of soap?" Clarence didn't bother guessing once the polling official admitted there were no right answers. His vote was neither cast nor counted. (1)

This story, from an article called *The New Voter Suppression*, came from one of the suggested daily activities that's part of Catonsville Presbyterian Church's 30 Day Dismantling Racism Challenge. The aims of this challenge, put together by a subgroup of our Peace and Justice Committee, are to hear the voices of people whose lives have been devalued and excluded. It's to help us recognize those who have been sent away from the table, hungry and unsatisfied. It's to educate us so we can see with clear eyes that prejudice and bias have labeled entire groups of people as "other" and therefore deemed them unworthy of full participation and equity and inclusion in the benefits of a White majority-controlled system. And.... the hardest part of the challenge.... is to enable us to change. Change our hearts. Change our minds. Change our behavior. So that we can work to change oppressive systems.

Today's gospel text offers insight and an invitation for us to be part of that challenge. Let's start with this unnamed woman. As Jesus and his friends go north from the Galilee into non-Israel territory, Tyre and Sidon, a woman --- a Canaanite woman --- a resident of the area, we presume --- comes over and starts shouting. She shouts loudly, continually, beseeching Jesus to heal her daughter. "Have mercy!" she's crying. "Have mercy!" "My daughter is tormented by a demon!" Her daughter is suffering! She is in pain! Her need is for healing and for wholeness. And what mother would not cry out to aid her child who is in desperate need? "Help!" "Help!" She is incessant. She does not stop! She's holding up her sign and shouting: *Canaanite Lives Matter*.

This next part is hard to read: *But he did not answer her at all.* Jesus? Jesus! The one who is supposed to hear our cries. The one who told us that God cares even for the sparrows. Jesus does not answer her at all. Did he even look at her? Did he look away? Was he just too tired, as some of the commentaries say? Just too exhausted from his ministry further south? Did he just need a break? Or maybe this possibility: was he too wrapped up in the plans for his ministry up in that region? Did Jesus have tunnel vision? (You know how it can get when you're wrapped up in your work.)

Well, maybe he was, maybe he did. But the Canaanite woman's voice keeps shouting. Shouting so much that even the disciples got motivated to do something about it. Oh, maybe not agitated enough to help her themselves, but they got up and went to Jesus to ask HIM to do something about it. But note their request. It's not: "Jesus, can you please help her out?" Nope. They ask him to do the nasty work. "Jesus: send her away." And why? Because she's so loud and so persistent and she won't leave them alone. Gosh, she's pushy. How are they supposed to get any rest with her carrying on like that?

This next part is hard to read too. Jesus says, in essence: She's not part of the group of people that I care about. She's not one of the people that our God cares about. *She's a foreigner.* Wholeness, healing --- these are not for her. They are not for her family, not for anyone who looks and lives and worships like her. She's a Canaanite. She is not one of us. She's excluded. *This is not for her.* I can imagine him saying to the disciples, "And you know all about this; this is ancient custom. We're separate but not equal. And... if you have any doubts, I've got Bible verses I can quote you to help you out."

Again, commentators like to defend Jesus at this point. They'll say that --- well, you know, he's challenging his disciples. Testing them, maybe. Offering them a chance to think about whether their social and religious norms are in keeping with the gospel message. It's a teaching method, is all. Jesus doesn't really go along with that exclusion idea --- does he? Other interpretations are worse: Jesus is testing her faith, seeing whether obstacles will cause her to give up and turn away. If that were the case, that would be the action of a capricious and uncaring God, don't you think? To look on suffering and say: "I'm not going to listen to you, I'm not going to help you unless you really, really mean it." What kind of God would be so cruel, callous, and indifferent? And if God could be that way, what kind of horrific or apathetic behavior would that inspire in us?

Next, in the most poignant moment in the text, the woman comes and kneels before Jesus, humbling herself, asking, begging, with all the beautiful desperation of a mother's love and says, "Lord. Help me. Help my child." How could one resist? A weeping mother begging on behalf of her daughter. How could one not see her humanity? How could someone, who has shown such compassion as to feed thousands of people a meal by the seashore, who has healed so many sick people by even the touch of the fringe of his garment... how could he, how could anyone say no? "At last," we think. "Surely now this woman will receive the healing that she and her family have been longing for. Crying for. Asking for. Okay Jesus. We're ready. Show us a miracle."

Now we get to the part of the text that is the hardest to hear: Jesus does not heal her daughter. He doesn't even say, "Well, this is just not the right time. You know I'd like to help you, but.... these kinds of things need to come slowly. Just be patient. A change is gonna come. Someday." Jesus says: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Friends, you can't pretty that up. How could one describe this statement? A slap in the face? Kicking someone when they are down? Jesus has looked at this woman in her grief and desperation and has refused to help her, first of all, but then insults her.... saying that she, and all who are like her, are dogs. B. I. T. C. H. This is not a microaggression. It's a macroaggression. Call it what it is.

Some commentators try hard with this one: "Well, you know, that word dog --- it could be maybe softened to 'puppy'?" No. The analogy is clear: Children --- the ones who are cared for, and fed at the table with a meal that is carefully, lovingly prepared -- versus Dogs. Jesus is effectively saying: "Dogs aren't human, and I do not see you in your humanity. I do not need to treat you with any dignity. Why should I care?"

Take a moment to let that sink in.

If this is a test of faith, as some scholars have suggested, if this is a test of this woman's faith, then I say: God bless this woman. God bless her for her intelligence. For her fierceness. For her ambition. For her persistence. For her refusal to take this for an answer. And for knowing what an act of faith truly is: it's the stubborn word of claiming both hope and promise: *Don't you tell me no.* With her wit, with her wisdom, with her genius for grasping the metaphor and

turning it with sly and brilliant verbal boomeranging, she speaks truth to power in words that that power can understand: *Don't you tell me no.* "Even dogs get the scraps from the children's table."

I don't know what went through Jesus' mind right then. I don't know how long it took for the sharp arrow of her words to shatter through the metaphor and pierce his heart. I can't grasp the mystery of that moment, when the ancient words and customs that kept people apart and separate came to be recognized for the lies and falsehoods that they are, which were then discarded, thrown away. I don't know how the intricacies of long-held biases and prejudices became understood as constructs that demean and diminish. In short, I don't know how Jesus was finally able to let it go. And be transformed. And to see.... finally see.... this woman as a beloved child of God. His equal. Different, yet no less valued. A Canaanite, a woman, – but not "other." A person who was...who is... entitled to be at the table of wholeness, completeness, and grace. There are two miracles in the story, really: the healing of the woman's daughter, yes, but first, the healing of the heart.

Let me repeat what I said at the beginning, about the 30 Day Challenge: We are called, we are invited: to hear the voices of people whose lives have been devalued and excluded; to recognize those who have been sent away from the table, hungry and unsatisfied; to see with clear eyes that prejudice and bias have labeled entire groups of people as "other" and therefore deemed them unworthy of full participation and equity and inclusion in the benefits of a majority-controlled system; and to change. Change hearts. Change minds. Change behavior. Change systems and structures that oppress and destroy and damage and limit and exclude.

This week we celebrate the change in our country that happened 100 years ago when full voting rights were granted to women in the United States. The 19th Amendment was ratified declaring "the vote shall not be denied because of one's sex." That change happened because a lot of voices said this phrase: *Don't you tell me no.* Women's voices. White women's voices. The voices of Black women. Native American women. Women all over this country were saying: "Look at me. Don't turn away. Listen." And all of the demanding, shouting, marching, protesting, made such a clamor and a ruckus that it finally got attention. It couldn't be ignored.

And though they heard prejudice and ignorance, abuse, -- and even appeals to reason -- spouted back at them time and time again -- words like: *She does not need to appear at the polls to vote because she is privileged to be represented there by men (her husband and brothers); 90 percent of women "do not want it or do not care."; They would be competing with men instead of cooperating; It is unwise to risk the good we already have for the evil which might occur; It's a sex disturbance... a straining after artificial happiness and unnatural enjoyment which indicates an unsettled and an unsatisfactory state of mind.* (2)

Nevertheless, they persisted. ***Don't you tell me no.*** And finally, ultimately, enough hearts and minds of men... who were the lawmakers at the time... were changed. They cast their vote and changed the U.S. Constitution.

Today's text gives us some role models to follow. (1) Voices who shout out; people who speak from the margins who demand justice and inclusion and equity. (2) Disciples - who hear the voices -- and are irritated to the point of discomfort --- and recognize that something definitely needs to be addressed. And (3) Jesus, who overcame the customs and prejudices that constrict and demean and diminish and exclude, and changed his mind, and learned to act with righteousness.

Where are we in the story? Are our voices shouting out? Are we clamoring about our current crisis in health care? Pointing out the inequities -- particularly for people of color in our health system? Are we speaking up about voter suppression, about disenfranchisement, again... particularly for people of color?

What voices are we hearing? Are we listening to those whose lives have been impacted by racism throughout the justice system? Can we hear women who have not yet received equal pay for equal work? Are the concerns of the LGBTQIA+ community reaching our consciousness? Are these voices causing us to confront and work through our preconceptions and prejudices? Do we listen with respect and openness, without defensiveness and fear?

And, when we are confronted with our own complicity in unjust systems and structures, are we able to acknowledge this, and with humility and compassion, work for change? Are we learning to be anti-racists? Are we seeking ways to

mobilize and to empower? Are we doing the work of a Christian – committed to liberation and the dismantling of oppression, affirming shared humanity, and the welcome and love of God for all people?

As we go out into our week, carrying the words of this gospel text in our thoughts and in our lives, we celebrate those voices who have been bringing us the liberating word: **Don't You Tell Me No**. For all those in the suffrage movement – for Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for Ida B. Wells, all who worked to expand the vote for all adult Americans, whatever color, whatever sex; for Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to the United States Congress, who said “If you don't have a seat at the table, bring a folding chair;” for Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, my compatriot from the Bronx, who spoke out against sexism, saying to a name-calling congressman, “I'm somebody's daughter too;” for the young people of Youth Rising Coalition here in Baltimore, who, despite the scarcity of employment opportunities in the city, are claiming for themselves the ownership of a business enterprise.

And last, for the voice of John Lewis, who spoke up with his words and his battered body – for the cause of equal voting rights --- and who gave us these parting words before he left this earth: *You've inspired me.... Around the country and the world you set aside race, class, age, language and nationality to demand respect for human dignity.... Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said we are all complicit when we tolerate injustice. He said it is not enough to say it will get better by and by. He said each of us has a moral obligation to stand up, speak up and speak out. When you see something that is not right, you must say something.*

And he encourages us all: *Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble. Voting and participating in the democratic process are key. The vote is the most powerful nonviolent change agent you have in a democratic society. You must use it because it is not guaranteed. You can lose it.*

As we go forth to speak, listen, to change ourselves and to change our systems, I close with these last beautiful words of his: *So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.*

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- 1 The New Voter Suppression, Theodore R. Johnson, Max Feldman, Brennan Center for Justice, Jan. 16, 20

 - 2 All quotes are from The Washington Post, Battle for the Ballot special section, Wednesday, August 12, 2020.