

*Thanks to our dear PJ Stewart who delivered Kate's sermon while Kate was on the mend. The title is "Widening the Circle" and it is based on Matthew 15:21-28. It reminds us that Jesus was fully human, giving us an example of someone open to "widening their circle" of concern.*

Out of all the lectionary readings, I would say that today's gospel is the one that makes people the most nervous. This is the story which causes commentators and scholars to bend over backwards trying to find an acceptable reason for Jesus' harsh and unkind comments to the Canaanite woman. "He was actually trying to teach the disciples" or "He was testing the woman's resolve." They seem desperate to soften his attitude toward her after her urgent plea for help. They are particularly uncomfortable with his use of the derogatory term "dogs" which was a common word used by Jews of the time to label her people. How could this be? This does **not** fit their image of Jesus – gentle, accepting, and all-compassionate. More than any other biblical reading, this one puts interpreters, and perhaps many of us, into a panic.

Perhaps there was a time when I would have been hyperventilating over the story too. For no, this is not an attractive portrayal of the one we call Son of God. It is incredible that this story even got past the cutting floor when Matthew constructed his book and the powers that were took it into the biblical canon. But honestly, I thank God they did. There are rich and important lessons here.

First, there is a gentle reminder. Jesus was **human**. A true human being born into a time and a context that shaped him as much as our time and context shapes us. He did not arrive fully formed and fully free of the guidance and nurturing of those around him. That is how human beings become who we are – in the close and intimate relationships of immediate family, followed by a wider immersion into a neighborhood, perhaps a faith community, our schools, our world. We become who we are in relationship to others as we are met, supported, and challenged to grow...or not.

Jesus was fully human, thus fully subject to what it means to be human, which means constituted by his relationships. Now, in this story that includes the woman from Canaan. She inserts herself into his world and the world of his

disciples. They are not ready for it. In fact, the disciples are all a bit irritated by this woman who is not playing by their culture's customs and rules and want her just to be gone. But both for them and for Jesus, she becomes an opportunity for change, for growth. Their attitudes are about to expand. Their circle of concern is about to widen. She presents herself and her need in a way that will not allow Jesus to keep his tunnel vision. The result? A healing, both for her daughter and for him. The woman from Canaan leaves the encounter with a daughter made whole. Jesus leaves the meeting with a prejudice broken apart, and a wider world to love.

I have no problem with this portrayal of Jesus. In fact, this is the Jesus I love – the man who not only teaches from the deep reaches of his heart, but who in his life shows us how that heart changes and grows by keeping it wide open. We do not get to know the inner thoughts of Jesus as he leaves this scene, we can only imagine them. I would expect he was having a pretty lively conversation with his Abba. "So, it was you, wasn't it, who put this woman on the road this morning?! Shouting and screaming...I could not ignore her. It must have been you. For as I looked into her eyes, I could feel my heart stretching. You are telling me that **all people** are my concern? Is that what is going on here? Oh God, this is so hard! But, I hear you. I hear you. I somehow knew you would not turn away from anyone. And now, neither can I. So, what else do I need to learn?"

As human beings we become who we are through our relationships. From infancy on we are shaped in ways that are nothing of our doing or choice. Yet, as our world expands, from immediate family on and outward, we learn, particularly in our early adolescence, that there is something **more to us**, that there is an "I" inside that can make choices, who can choose to open to people and things, and in this day of the internet, to cultures beyond our own. Sometimes that "I" finds this all too challenging, and chooses to stay embedded in the familiar setting with the familiar

rules. But sometimes that “I” is a person of faith. Jesus was such a person.

People of faith have developed a basic trust that keeps their eyes open to all of life as it presents itself. Faith is not a list of beliefs we carry, but an **open stance** that allows us to be present to the moment, vulnerable to truth, responsive to spirit, and open to change. Contemporary theologian Dorothee Soelle describes the life of Christian faith as “one of constantly chiming in to the great ‘yes’ to life.” The great “yes” is the yes of faith. It does not mean constant exhilaration and excitement. Sometimes coming to this yes is a struggle. “O God,” we might pray, “do I have to deal with this too? Are you asking me to love them too?” But ultimately, the yes is one of joy as our circle of concern widens and is ever more wondrous to behold!

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Jesus was a person of deep faith, as was the woman from Canaan who broke through her prejudices to ask for help from this Jewish man. How do we get to be such? How do we come to live our lives with an open, loving, yes-filled stance? The answer is both simple and demanding. Jesus shows us the way. Yes, we human beings are shaped by our relationships. But if our primary relationship is with **God**, with the spirit of God ever whispering into our souls, then our entire life will be marked by an ever-widening circle of concern. For the open stance of faith leads us on, little by little, to see with God’s eyes, to feel with God’s heart, to touch the world with God’s tender compassion. There is no prejudice, disdain, or hatred in the Creator of all things. As we develop this relationship with God, and **it develops us**, our hearts will stretch...and stretch...and stretch until **all beings** find a home in us. Then everywhere, with everyone, we will **be at home**. Amen.

## ADULT FAITH FORMATION AT THE FIRST CHURCH

As we begin to rev up for the new year of Sunday School, we want to remind everyone that “faith formation” or religious education is a **life-long venture**.

Our relationship with God grows as our understandings stretch and deepen. So, we invite you to consider joining us this **Fall** for one or more of these prayer and learning opportunities.

### **Finding the Center: a Journaling Gathering**

The second Saturdays of the month

10 – 12 p.m.

First Church Library

### **Living the Questions: a Video Discussion**

Friday evenings, September 16<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>

6 – 7:30 p.m.

First Church Parsonage

### **Communion Gathering and Discussion**

Every Wednesday

5:30 – 6:30 p.m.

First Church Parsonage

### **Book Study**

The book and date is being determined at press time. If you have any suggestions, speak to Deacon Linda Warner or Pastor Kate.

**Questions?** Leave a message for Pastor Kate at the church office.