

Stephen Shaver
Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA
August 16, 2020
Year A, Proper 15, Revised Common Lectionary, Track 2
[Isaiah 51:1-6](#)
[Psalm 138](#)
[Romans 12:1-8](#)
[Matthew 16:13-20](#)

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A little over two years ago when our family first moved into Incarnation's rectory and started exploring the neighborhood, one of the first things I noticed was the signs. Black and white yard signs, with inspirational quotes about justice and social change. Maybe you've seen them too—they're all over Sonoma County, but they're particularly thick in my neighborhood near the Junior College. And eventually I learned that that's because the project started there, with four neighbors on Benton Street. They got together after the 2016 election and formed this project, which they called the Benton Street Improvement Association, selling yard signs for \$10 with the proceeds going to charity. The project ended last year, so you can't get a new sign anymore. But they're still everywhere: quotes from the Dalai Lama, from César Chávez, from Martin Luther King, Jr.

One I run past a lot has a famous one attributed to the poet Maya Angelou: "Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better."

It's a deceptively simple statement with a lot to unpack. There's a kind of realistic attitude about human limitations. You can't do better than wherever you are at the stage of growth and understanding you're at. And yet Angelou doesn't let us off the hook either. We're supposed to keep learning, know better, and do better.

Today's gospel reading is one of the most remarkable stories, I think, in the whole New Testament: because it shows Jesus, our Savior, the Word of God made flesh, learning better and doing better.

I should say that, like most scripture stories, there's more than one way to read this one. It's possible to interpret this story in ways that get Jesus off the hook: maybe in saying no to the Canaanite woman at first, he's testing her, or testing the disciples, but knows all along what he plans to do.

But today I want to suggest what I think is the simpler interpretation: that here we see Jesus in his full humanity, coming into an encounter with someone outside his own people; coming into that encounter with attitudes and understandings he's

absorbed since childhood from those around him. With prejudices. And, wonder of wonders, we see him transformed by that encounter.

He initially refuses to heal this woman's daughter, because she's a Canaanite, a Gentile. I preached on the version of this story in Mark's gospel about two years ago, and in that version she's called a Greek and a Syrophenician. But Matthew reaches back into Old Testament history to use a classic word for the foreigners who were enemies of Israel: Canaanites. Jesus says he understands his mission as being only to the people of Israel. But more than that: he even insults this woman, using what's essentially a racial slur by calling her a dog. Unthinking, perhaps. Hurtful, no doubt. And this woman does something truly amazing: she calls him on his prejudice.

She comes to him strategically, even calling him the Jewish title "Son of David." She comes to him cleverly, with wit, turning his own comment about dogs back on him. She tells him, essentially, that Canaanite lives matter. And Jesus, in his full humanity, is startled into learning, and growing, and into a change of heart. This unnamed Canaanite woman catapults Jesus into a moment of conversion.

It's a conversion, not away from his ancestral faith, but more deeply into it. Because all through the Hebrew scriptures there are recurring strands of the idea that God's covenant, God's special relationship with the people of Israel, isn't just for them alone. It's meant to be a blessing that extends out to all nations. We see that in today's reading from Isaiah, where God says that foreigners will be gathered into the covenant. We saw it as early as God's promise to Abraham, father of Israel, who said that through his descendants *all nations of the world* would be blessed. In our epistle reading today Paul is wrestling with this same idea, trying to understand how it is that most of his own beloved people of Israel haven't joined the Jesus movement, haven't accepted Jesus as the Messiah. And he comes to a place of saying: it's a mystery; God only knows; but God's relationship with Israel is forever, and at the same time, in Jesus God is bringing the Gentiles into the covenant in a new way as well.

Now as Christians we proclaim that Jesus lived in every way as one of us, yet without sin.¹ And I think I would say that it wasn't a sin, in and of itself, that Jesus grew up with the attitudes around him; it was humanity. It would have been sin if he had failed to confront those attitudes in himself. It would have been sin if he had chosen not to learn better, or once he knew better, not to do better.

And after all, there's a long tradition in scripture of human beings being able to change God's mind—being able to coax God to be more merciful, more gracious—if you will, getting God to act more like God.

¹ Hebrews 4:15; Eucharistic Prayer D, *Book of Common Prayer* p. 374.

Maybe you know the story in the book of Genesis where Abraham bargains with God not to destroy a wicked city if there are as many as 50 good people there—then comes back: what about 45? What if there are 40? 30? 20? 10? And then there's the story in the book of Exodus where God's people have made an idol to worship and God says to Moses, I'm fed up; I'm going to destroy this people and make a new chosen people out of your descendants. And Moses says, essentially, God, how embarrassing for you if the other nations found out you gave up on your own people—and God relents and forgives them.

The point of these stories isn't that God is mean and capricious—far from it. The point is that God loves and respects us, human beings, so much as to take us seriously and to let *us* be part of the conversation, part of the story. Maybe even sometimes, in a paradox, to play a part in helping God act like God.

So here today, even though Jesus is the Savior and Healer and Lord, maybe he's not actually the star of this story. Today the star is this Canaanite woman, who is determined, and strategic, and like a new Abraham or Moses, she won't take no for an answer. She persists. And through the sheer moral power of her persistence, she gets what she seeks.

I wonder where you see yourself in this story today. Maybe you're Jesus. Maybe you're a white person being confronted with your own need to know better and do better about race and racism, or a man or a straight person being confronted with your need to know better and do better about gender and sexuality. There are opportunities all around us. Some of us at Incarnation have been participating in anti-racism groups through Sonoma County's interfaith community or through our diocese. We can choose to let ourselves be transformed, for our own freedom and flourishing as well as that of our neighbors. Or we can hide from that confrontation.

Or maybe you're the Canaanite woman in this story today. Maybe you're stepping up to seek justice for yourself or your loved ones. Maybe you need healing and you're not going to wait for it any longer. Maybe God's Spirit is surging through you to give you words to speak. Maybe you're the one God will work through to transform hearts and minds and institutions.

Maybe you've been both at points in your life, and will be again. God is still working today to widen the circle, to spread the blessing so none of God's beloved ones will ever be left out again. God is working today all around us. May God also do that work in us, and through us.