

Drawn to Jesus

Some of you will know the story I'm about to share as I posted it on Facebook and Twitter this week. This past Tuesday evening I was at home, in the kitchen, making up a batch of apricot jam. It had been a long day, a work day, a day that ended with an extended, and somewhat intense, telephone conversation with a friend about faith.

There was a knock at the kitchen door, and as I approached the door I could see through the window two young men in white shirts and ties, and dark slacks, holding books in their hands.

"Nice evening," the closest one said, "though it's a bit smoky." In my tiredness I mumbled, "This isn't a good time."

Undeterred, he responded cheerfully, "When would be a better time?" "I—I don't know," I stammered weakly.

"Would you be interested in hearing a message about Jesus Christ?" he continued. "No thank you," I said and closed the door.

I walked away and said to myself, Did I just do that—did I just say out loud that I'm not interested in a message about Jesus Christ? After all my going on about evangelism?? Well, it had just been that kind of day.

When I somewhat ashamedly posted this story to Facebook my brother-in-law responded, "Weren't you at all tempted to explain that you already have some idea about the message about Jesus?"

The Gospel story that Alice read for us today is a bit like that, like the conversation I *didn't* have with the evangelists at the door. It's a conversation between different understandings of who Jesus is. It's a conversation between insiders—the disciples—and an outsider—a woman identified as a Canaanite, a gentile, a non-Jewish person. The woman has a daughter who is desperately ill.

Now, to be sure, this is a story that makes us wince. Jesus, God incarnate, appears to compare this woman to a dog, presumably because of her non-Jewish status. Despite what it might look like on the surface of this text, I want to be clear that there is no justification for misogyny or racial superiority to be found in the Gospel. That is not the way of Jesus; that is not God's will.

One way of hearing this story that I have found helpful, and that you might find helpful too, is to see it as a conversation between these two perspectives on who Jesus is, with Jesus kind of mediating the conversation. So

some of what Jesus says is perhaps Jesus verbalizing, testing out, what the disciples are thinking, and maybe even what the woman is thinking, too. That's how I want to approach this story.

Jesus and the disciples are out of bounds, they are well-outside of Jewish territory, in gentile country. A woman from that place shouts for Jesus' attention, not unlike others in the gospels who cry to Jesus from the margins, like blind Bartimaeus at the roadside outside Jericho.

This is in part an indication of their marginalized status: they have to shout to be heard, to wave their arms to be seen. They need to make a scene to get the attention of the insiders, the calm, dignified, sober, well-behaved people around Jesus.

At first Jesus seems content to ignore the woman's pleas. Perhaps he is waiting to see what the disciples will do. They—these insiders, those closest to Jesus—say, 'Send her away; she keeps shouting at us. She's making a scene!'

Jesus says, 'Well, I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel. I guess my hands are tied.' Perhaps he's testing the disciples here, and challenging the woman as well. She rises to the challenge, kneeling before Jesus and saying simply, "Lord, help me."

Jesus pushes further with the woman, as if to say, 'Do you believe that it's possible for me, a Jewish messiah, to help you, a gentile woman?' Her response—"even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table"—testifies to her belief that Jesus has the power to heal her daughter.

Again, we may be tempted to read this through the lens of misogyny, as though the woman is grovelling on her knees for crumbs; and Jesus is condescendingly tossing some crumbs her way. But we don't need to read it this way.

It may be that the woman is rather skilfully verbally jousting with Jesus, and winning the argument. She's determined to get healing for her daughter. She won't take No for an answer; she won't be put off by the insiders' dismissal of her needs, or their disapproval of her behaviour. She seems to know something about Jesus that the disciples don't know.

In the end it is the woman's faith, and not the disciples' attitude, that is vindicated by Jesus. "Great is your faith!" exclaims Jesus. You may recall in last week's reading how Jesus noted the *little* faith of Peter, the leader of the disciples. In contrast to Peter's little faith, Jesus commends the great faith of this woman, this gentile outsider. She knows something about Jesus that the insiders have missed, that indeed Jesus is Saviour, not only of those on the inside, those of his own Jewish faith, but Saviour of all, even those we think of as outsiders.

There are some important lessons here for us who gather to hear a message about Jesus Christ today. The message for those of us who are insiders, who have a long history of relationship with Jesus, is that, while Jesus loves us, he doesn't love just us, but is always moving out to the margins, the edges, the badlands even, to reach everyone with his love and with his healing power.

And if we would love and follow Jesus, then we need to be doing the same

thing. Loving those whom Jesus loves. It means we have to be willing to suspend our judgment of those who may not look like us, or act like us, those who may not fit our notions of correct behaviour. That's where we need to remember that when we are tempted to look down our noses at some of those who come in search of Jesus, Jesus is instead reaching out to them, and drawing them in, drawing them in to places like this.

There are lessons here, too, for those who have been drawn here, those who are new to this congregation, those who are new Christians, those who are new friends of Jesus.

To those who are new to this community or new to faith in Jesus, this story is a reminder that we insiders don't always get it right. We don't always get Jesus right. And sometimes we insiders have something to learn from those whom Jesus has newly drawn to himself.

Like most congregations, we at Trinity pride ourselves on our friendliness and welcome, but often we're better at welcoming those who look like us—seniors, retirees, folks with a long United Church pedigree—than we are in welcoming younger people, working age people, people of different heritages and backgrounds.

Sometimes that's because we feel uncertain; we're not sure how to approach people who are different from our usual social circle. Sometimes we carry expectations that younger people, or people from different backgrounds, will automatically adopt our norms of behaviour: we want them to be exactly like us, or like we were when we were

their age, and we show our disapproval in subtle or overt ways when they don't meet our expectations.

That's when we need to check in with Jesus.

That's when we need to ask ourselves if we are getting in Jesus' way. Because Jesus will always draw people to himself. Because the Gospel is powerful medicine, healing whatever ails us. It will always draw people who have heard something about Jesus, people who know something about Jesus the way that that Canaanite woman did—people who know something about Jesus that we insiders may have forgotten.

The arrival of newcomers, strangers, people who are different from the typical norm of our congregation is such a gift to us. Not because they are going to save the church from extinction, and replace us on committees or on the rolls of financial donors!

But because they can teach us something about Jesus that we don't know, or that we have forgotten. They can help us to rekindle the fire of our faith, to remember what first drew us to follow Jesus and commit our lives to him.

A little while ago I shared an article with you that talked about the difference between hospitality—basic friendliness—and the next step, inclusion—really allowing ourselves and our community to be changed by the participation of people newly drawn to Jesus.

The article listed three signs of inclusion. First, newcomers are invited into smaller groups as full participants;

that might be committees and teams, or the Board. Second, newcomers are invited to share their gifts and stories with the congregation; we show an interest in their story, even when it is different from ours. And third, the participation of newcomers begins to impact the congregation's culture and practices.

This might be the most challenging for us, as it might mean changes to our worship life, or how committees work, or our familiar practices of fellowship.

Again, this is an opportunity for us to check in with Jesus, to remember why we are here, and what first drew us to participate in Christian community as followers of Jesus.

It may seem scary at first, but we need to trust that it is also exciting. It can be exciting for us to rekindle our faith, and to see how knowing Jesus is transforming the lives of people who are new to us.

This story is good news for all of us because it reminds us that when we extend the hand of welcome, we are doing what Jesus wants us to do.

And this story has a message for those newly drawn to Jesus. Come, come and participate in the life of the church. Come, and please persevere if at first you don't receive the warmest welcome. Trust that we longer-term disciples are doing our best, but that we don't always get it right. We don't always get Jesus right. That's why we say we are a community learning to love like Jesus. Help us to learn, let us learn from one another, that together we might be a more faithful witness to the Gospel.

Let us pray:¹

Jesus, stir up in us a passionate, determined persistence to be with you, to learn from you, and to grow in our understanding of the whole scope of your mercy.

Forgive us when we attempt to limit the boundaries of your kingdom or when we fail to show hospitality to and welcome newcomers. Lead us to examine our congregation and our own hearts, to be sure that we are open and welcoming to those whom you call to yourself.

Give us what we need not to tire in our continuing, resolute determination to be your faithful followers. Amen.

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¹ Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource.