

**August 20 2017**

**Tim Hughes Williams**

**Sermon: To Tell The Truth**

**Old Testament Lesson (Liturgist): Isaiah 56:1-8**

<sup>1</sup>Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. <sup>2</sup>Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil.

<sup>3</sup>Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely separate me from his people”; and do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a dry tree.” <sup>4</sup>For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, <sup>5</sup>I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. <sup>6</sup>And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant— <sup>7</sup>these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. <sup>8</sup>Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.

**New Testament Lesson (Preacher): Matthew 15:21-28**

<sup>21</sup>Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup>Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” <sup>23</sup>But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” <sup>24</sup>He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” <sup>25</sup>But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” <sup>26</sup>He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” <sup>27</sup>She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” <sup>28</sup>Then Jesus answered her,

“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

### **Sermon:**

A while back, I sat down with Michael to choose the preaching texts for this week. God bless the musicians who are constantly forcing us to look ahead and plan these worship services!

For those of you who don't know, we preach from the lectionary, which is a three-year cycle of Scripture passages selected by a worldwide council of churches. Those of us who preach from the lectionary believe that doing so performs two functions. First, it places us in conversation with churches all around the world who will be reading and discussing the same thing. Secondly, the lectionary imposes itself upon the preacher, who left to her own devices might simply gravitate towards a favorite selection. If one believes that the Holy Spirit is speaking to us through the collision of text, preacher, congregation, and world, then it is important to be in community when putting it all together. It keeps us honest.

Within each week of the lectionary, the preacher can choose from a set of potential texts. So there is still some control over the process. When Michael and I took a first-pass over the texts for today, my first statement was, “Well, it won't be the Canaanite woman.” I believe what I actually said was, “Well, I won't be preaching on the Canaanite woman on my second-to-last week at Brown Memorial.” Too messy. Let's go out on a high note!

We dismissed her out of hand. We moved on. I selected the moving final passages of the Book of Genesis, when Joseph is reunited with his brothers. It's a crowd-pleaser. We picked hymns based upon themes of forgiveness and reconciliation. And then Michael went on a well-deserved vacation. And then hundreds of Klansmen and Nazis descended upon the University of Virginia at dusk, carrying torches like some kind of medieval mob. And then all of the conflict of the following day. And then 1,000 people marching through the streets of Baltimore, asking that our confederate monuments be removed. And then, our

President, offering a false equivalency between Nazis and Klansmen and those who came to oppose them.

All of that happened. And when I sat down this week to begin preparing this sermon, it was clear that forgiveness and reconciliation are not where we are right now.

I sat there at my computer, pondering. Maybe we were going in the wrong direction. I went back to the lectionary, the way you will check your dresser drawers for a missing item for the second or third time, knowing full well you won't find it there. And guess who was sitting there, waiting for me to come to my senses? She had never left, as it turns out. That Canaanite woman. Let us pray.

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First, I guess, a little context.

One thing to know is that throughout much of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, the Canaanite people, the people of Canaan, served as a foil for the Israelite people. One way in which Israelites identified themselves was "not Canaanite." According to the genealogy of Genesis, the people of Canaan trace their lineage back to Ham, the dishonored son of Noah. After Ham's disrespectful behavior towards his father, Noah says, "Cursed be Canaan, lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers" (Genesis 9:25). Justified or not, effective or not, this curse becomes a part of the Israelite imagination, and another reason why the Canaanite people were considered inherently inferior.

The distinction is deepened when God promises Abraham, the Israelite patriarch, that his ancestors will expand and occupy the land of Canaan as their own (Genesis 17:8). The Book of Exodus tells the story of that occupation, with Joshua leading the Israelite army into the city of Jericho and beyond. The Book of Deuteronomy includes Canaan on a list of nations which Israel has permission to "annihilate" in the course of their manifest destiny to occupy the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 20:18). While there is no Biblical or historical evidence that such an annihilation ever occurred, there is abundant evidence that Israelite disdain for Canaanite people was rooted in this cocktail of historical conflict, racial tension, and religious conviction. Sound familiar?

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I was excited to read Ta-Nahesi Coates' memoir, "Between The World And Me" when it was published back in 2015.<sup>1</sup> Coates is a Baltimore author and the book is written as a letter to his son to help explain the dynamics of race in America in the aftermath of Ferguson. One of the key ideas of the book is that the concepts of Whiteness and Blackness are social constructs, birthed and perpetuated in the service of something that Coates calls "The Dream." The Dream is the ideal American life. "The Dream is perfect houses with nice lawns," he writes. "The Dream is tree houses and Cub Scouts. The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake. And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our [black] bodies."<sup>2</sup>

Coates calls this image of America "the Dream" because it is not rooted in reality. It does not tell the truth that there is no "Whiteness" without "Blackness," without a foil of inferiority to allow for a feeling of superiority. The Dream does not tell the truth of where we are, how we got here, and who must be destroyed in order to keep it that way.

Because he is now considered something of an expert on race relations in America, Coates is constantly asked questions that reveal to him that so many of us – particularly those of us with the luxury of not paying attention – are sleepwalking through American history with the broad boilerplate language of Christianity and Democracy gracing our lips.

"America understands itself as God's handiwork," he writes, "but the black body is the clearest evidence that America is the work of men."<sup>3</sup>

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If you think it is a stretch to compare the experience of Canaanite people to that of African Americans, I will only point out that slave-owning

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<sup>1</sup> Ta-Nahesi Coates, "Between The World And Me," Random House, NY, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

American Christians justified their practices by suggesting that Africans were literally the descendents of Canaanites and thus still effected by the curse of Ham. <sup>4</sup>

The very interesting thing about Jesus as it relates to all this Canaanite history is that he has no less than three Canaanite women in his own family tree, as delineated in the first chapter of Matthew. Rahab, Tamar, and Ruth, despite their status as widows, prostitutes, and foreigners, are listed as exemplars of faith in God.

Jesus, just like many Israelites, was literally related to the Canaanite people. And yet the distinctions of race, class, and religion, so important to self-esteem and self-identification, endure.

The text says that Jesus “went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon” (Matthew 15:21). Tyre and Sidon are two adjacent port cities north of the region of Galilee. Today you will find their footprint in Lebanon. At the time in which Jesus traveled there, there might have been a handful of Israelites there but it was clearly Canaanite territory. <sup>5</sup>

His reputation as a teacher and healer preceded him, even to these unfamiliar areas. So it is not shocking that the Canaanite woman uses reverent language in approaching him.

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon!” She is a passionate welcoming party of one. She is shouting. It’s unnerving. And what is Jesus’ response? He ignores her. The disciples ignore her. In fact, they come up to Jesus, whispering uncomfortably. They ask him to send her away.

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel,” he says.

It’s shocking to witness this behavior in Jesus and the disciples. But of course, I have to say that if you live in Baltimore, you recognize this behavior right away. How do *you* respond when approached on the

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/01/arts/from-noah-s-curse-to-slavery-s-rationale.html>

<sup>5</sup> “Jesus in the Region of Tyre and Sidon.”  
<http://www.plymouthbrethren.org/article/5052>

streets by a stranger who you can tell is about to ask you for something? Especially if that person seems emotional? If you are like me, you might be tempted to pretend that you don't see or hear that person. Because if you see or hear that person, you will have to listen and respond. And that will *ask* something of you.

So they are ignoring her. The Canaanite woman persists, falling on her knees before Jesus. I note that this action is simultaneously subservient and aggressive. She assumes the traditional posture of worship while also forcing Jesus to acknowledge her existence. "Lord, help me," she says.

That's when Jesus says maybe the most troubling thing he's ever said: "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

I should stop here and say that it's not unusual for Jesus to use strong language. It's just that he usually punches up, reserving his harsh words for religious and political leaders. He is known for his brave and counter-cultural respect for outsiders and marginal people. So his statement here is unexpected to say the least.

Now - cue at this moment the herd of anxious interpreters. They rush to the scene, ready to rescue Jesus, ready to spin this uncomfortable moment into some kind of lesson. *Of course* Jesus was prepared to listen to the woman, they say. *Of course* he would never deploy such an offensive metaphor against a person whose ethnicity and gender labeled them as inferior. He is *testing* the disciples. A test that by all accounts, they failed. Jesus knows that the disciples will be building his church in the near future. He is teaching them, by negative example, that their church will be a church for *all* people.

That is the mainstream interpretation of this passage and I suppose it is possible. But I think we need to be honest and say that there is nothing in the text to support it. To interpret it as such is in the service of an agenda not found in the text - which is to protect Jesus' divinity at the expense of his humanity.

Can Jesus learn? I think that is the critical question here. Many people have theological reasons for saying he cannot. God is all-knowing and

unchanging. How could God learn? If you adopt this position, then the only possible explanation is that Jesus is deploying his interaction with the woman as some sort of object lesson. If you *do* believe that Jesus is capable of learning – if you believe that Jesus in his humanity was capable of succumbing to the cultural blinders of his era, then we are witnessing something else.

If you do believe that Jesus can learn, then the subject of the story is not Jesus at all, but rather this very persistent Canaanite woman.

“It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” Jesus says.

“Yes, Lord,” she says, “but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

She is striking that same disarming tone of both humility and defiance. She is possibly alluding to the miraculous multiplication of bread, recorded just a chapter earlier in Matthew. “Have you forgotten already,” she seems to say, “your own generosity?” Her words seem to transform Jesus’ position almost instantly.

“Woman, great is your faith!” he says. “Let it be done for you as you wish.”

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In the end, I returned to the Canaanite woman because I cannot think of a better text with which to unpack our present moment. We are at an American moment where we have to speak directly and precisely about the role that race has played in the history of our country and our church. By “our church” I mean the worldwide church but I could just as easily be talking about this congregation because there is not a church in our country that has not been shaped by its relationship to America’s original sin.

To unpack Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman is to enter the uncomfortable space where abstract theological principles collide with particular human beings.

Yes, it is true that there is a history of diminishing the Canaanite people in the Old Testament. But there is also a history of generosity to foreigners, redemption by foreigners, even. Jesus knows this. He teaches this.

What was Jesus talking about right before they were approached by the woman? They had recently been criticized for eating food that the temple considered unclean. Jesus offered a classic teaching. It is not what goes into your mouth that makes you unclean, he says, but what comes out. It is not your customs that render you holy, but rather the contents of your heart.

It's classic Jesus, upsetting convention, drawing the circle wider, getting to the spiritual heart of the matter. All well and good until you find yourself talking to a Canaanite woman. The words that come from her mouth are entirely orthodox. But suddenly, Jesus is only here for the children of Israel.

This, concisely, is why #AllLivesMatter doesn't cut it. This is why our boilerplate language about justice and peace don't cut it. This why the President's initial and final statements about Charlottesville were entirely inadequate. Our minds are deceitful. We center the whole world around our own perspective and when we speak in generalities from that place, justice is not done. If you find that your personal perspective is the one reflected back to you in history books, mainstream media, and police reports, then you are coming from a place of privilege. You are at-risk of failing to recognize the humanity of people who are different from you.

The Canaanite woman is not here for it. She continue to provoke Jesus. She physically blocks his path. She forces him to reckon with their shared humanity. That collision, however uncomfortable, is transformative. Transformative for Jesus, transformative for the woman, healing for her daughter.

I would argue that Jesus' generosity of spirit and Jesus' radical love were intact from the beginning. I would also argue that his cross-cultural encounter taught him to broaden that spirit across diverse and



particular cultures. That hard work is what we must do now if the rhetoric of American democracy and the rhetoric of Christianity are to have any credibility. I think that is what is at stake here.

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The author and social worker Brene Brown has spent much of her career researching about vulnerability and shame. It was not immediately obvious to me how she would connect her research to what happened in Charlottesville last weekend but a couple of days ago, she recorded a Facebook Live video about it.

“I talk a lot about the power of owning our stories,” she said. “If we own our story, we get to write our ending. If we don’t own our stories, our stories will own us.”

She goes on to say that it is a universal principle of psychotherapy that individuals who do not confront the experiences that bring them shame, they will continue to be influenced by those experiences in unhealthy ways. Psychotherapy does the hard work of unearthing those stories and confronting them. Doing so robs those stories, however painful, of their power. Sometimes the stories even become assets, as individuals learn to use them to help others.

If this principle is so consistently true on the individual level, she argues, why would it not be true on the macro level as well? Watching Charlottesville, Brown was convinced that the collective story of America is white supremacy. “And we have not owned it,” she said. And now, it owns us.”<sup>6</sup>

Just like individuals will deny and repress uncomfortable truths about themselves, collective groups of people will deny and repress stories. There are all sorts of nifty ways people repress memories and convince themselves otherwise. But it in the collective, it is even easier because we can only see the world through our own lenses. Everyone has blind spots based on their perspective, but those of us in majority cultures

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<sup>6</sup> Brene Brown. “We Need To Keep Talking About Charlottesville.”  
<https://www.facebook.com/brenebrown/videos/1778878652127236/>

have more blind spots than anyone, because we are the least likely to be challenged. If I see the world through the lens of my white skin, why should I believe what someone else has a different experience? Like Ta-Nehesi Coates says, we are living in the Dream.

How do we correct this problem? Brown has a simple solution. Listen to people who are different than you. Believe people's stories. Believe people's experience as they tell them to you.

Listening and believing are the first step. And just as in any interaction, listening and believing will *ask* something of you. Among many things, it may ask you to see yourself in a less flattering light. That is the painful work that Brene Brown calls "owning our story." It is the first and essential step towards transformation.

The Bible just calls it the Truth. "Then you will know the truth," Jesus says, "and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

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I find it kind of amusing that the healing of the daughter, the so-called payoff at the end of Jesus' awkward conversation with the woman, is almost an afterthought. "And her daughter was healed instantly," the text says, wrapping things up. She is, of course, not present. No one goes to check on her either, so it falls to the narrator to let us know.

I'm struck that the real healing of the story is happening front and center. I have to think that none of them – the woman, the disciples, dare I say Jesus himself, were exactly the same. The ideals, of course, hadn't changed. They were as old as the prophet Isaiah. "The foreigners who love the Lord, these I will bring to my holy mountain," said the prophet, hundreds of years before Christ. "I will make them joyful in my house of prayer." Jesus knew these words, of course. But living them out, not just in the abstract dream of liturgy but in the actual living breathing breadth of God's creation? That kind of healing is far from instant. It takes work and time and grace.

We are surely not the only ones doing that work but the Church is uniquely gifted to speak to this moment. We have been part of the problem and we must be part of the solution. We

It is our calling as God's people. We will listen and we will own our story and we will tell the truth. And you know what?

The truth will set us free.