

And yet, she persisted.
Proper 18B Christ Episcopal Church Sausalito 9/9/18
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Oh, God. Breathe into us this day a spirit of wisdom, a spirit of tolerance and a spirit of courage. Amen. Please be seated.

When I was young, growing up in Connecticut, I spent quite a bit of time in Maine. During the 60's and 70's there wasn't much diversity there. Believe me. I stood out. People said things like, "Can I touch you? or Can I touch your hair? or We don't allow our kids to watch Sesame Street. They might grow up wanting to have black people and Puerto Ricans as friends." And my favorite: "I've never seen anyone black before. Only Diahann Carroll on that T.V. show, Julia."

I remember being at recess in the first grade and another child saying to me, "So, what do I call you? Colored? Negro? Afro-American? Black?" "I said to him, "My name is Alberta. You can call me. Alberta." I've spent most of my life resisting labels. Resisting not being seen beyond the color of my skin for who I am.

In 2006, I took Dave with me back to Maine. I wanted him to see this place I loved. To have lobster 3 times a day if we wanted, because it's so cheap. You can drive up to the fisherman's driveway and pick it up as he comes home with the day's haul. To have clam chowder. Real Chowdah! to see the beaches I went to as a teenager. To see the beauty of this place.

Well, long story short. We found ourselves in the company of a couple, let's call them Dick and Jane, who came from South Africa. Now Dick and Jane are white South Africans who happened to have loved apartheid. They benefited from the brutality heaped upon black people there and left their country in disgust when apartheid ended. Well, we were stuck in a car with them, trying to make polite small talk, as we drove to the gigantic L.L. Bean store in Freeport. Dick said to me, "We've just been given good news. It's official. We've become American citizens. Our paperwork has come through and everything's been finalized." Their faces lit up with huge smiles. I said to them, "Congratulations. Now you are African-Americans." A look of horror swept over their faces. They said to me, "No. No. You're African American. We aren't." I said, "Hmm. Let's think about this. You were born and raised in Africa, lived almost your entire lives, and now you're American citizens. Someday I hope to visit Africa but I've never been there. I was born and raised in America. So who is African American?" We didn't speak much after that.

I invite you to take your bulletins home today and read the lessons again. They're asking us to look at our attitudes towards other people. In the Epistle, James asks his listeners how is it they are serving God by showing favor to those with gold rings and fine clothes. People of privilege. They knew, as we know, the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves. To protect those who are weak,

clothe the naked, feed the hungry, shelter those who have no home, heal the sick, be with those outcast and looked upon as other.

Which brings me to the Syrophenician woman. Jesus has wandered into Tyre (which is now Lebanon). Maybe He just wanted a little rest. If you remember the lessons of the previous weeks, a lot has gone on. This was where Gentiles lived. He may have thought he could go about unrecognized. This area was considered to be an unclean place.

The readers this text was meant for would have understood this to be what one author called, "a spiritual slum, a veritable ghetto of unbelief. It's a place where THOSE people live. The disciples were probably uncomfortable just being there. But there's a strong woman there who knows who Jesus is. At first he doesn't seem to be the same Jesus we know and love. So who is this Jesus? And what's up with this woman?

Well, taking my cue from Senator Elizabeth Warren, I'll say this of her:

"She persisted."

She was ignored. And yet, she persisted.

In Matthew's retelling of this story, Jesus tells the disciples, "Hey, I'm only here for the Jews. "

And yet, she persisted.

She is pretty much called a dog to her face.

And yet, she persisted.

This mother needs help for her sick child.

Kyrie Eleison.

Lord Have Mercy on Me.

Make no mistake about it. She knows He's Jewish and she knows exactly who she is talking to. And she knows it's against the rules to approach Him: Because He's Jewish, Because she is not, And because she is a woman. A perfect trifecta of "no's."

But that won't stop a mother whose child is suffering. Jesus seems to be behaving as the status quo in their exchange. He speaks to her from a place of privilege that is filled with racism and elitism. Where is the Jesus whose message is love? Where is the Jesus that I want to be like? Where did he go?

He's called her a dog. The lowest of the low. Some scholars have translated this to be more kind. Something like, "little puppy". Something comparable to what we might say, like "silly goose" or "you rascal". I don't know if this makes it okay or not. Author Letty Russell says this about this passage: "Jesus is caught with His compassion down."

But maybe, Jesus is using her to teach a powerful lesson. How different she is from the Pharisees. They want their due because of the traditions of the day, because of their privileged status. But this mother is asking for help based on her love for her daughter.

Her plea is based on compassion and not based on privilege or tradition. And maybe she is teaching them all what mercy means. Hearts are transformed. Compassion and Mercy win.

Jesus moved beyond the prejudice of the day and saw a mother and child in need. When it comes to a battle of wits in other scripture, it's always Jesus who is the victor but here a relatively insignificant woman is.

The little girl may have been healed but perhaps, although Jesus truly divine and yet truly human, was too and the wall between Jew and non Jew is torn down.

Where are your walls that need tearing down? What small step can you take?

I did not always agree with the late Sen. John McCain but I would like to share a quote from his posthumous letter. He said, "We weaken our greatness when we hide behind walls rather than tear them down."

There are people in this country, who no longer hide under white sheets with eye holes. They believe it is their right to hate. They believe they are privileged. Their simmering rage, kept undercover for so long, is bubbling up to the surface. I'm quite sure that Dick and Jane, wherever they are a very happy about this. They can see powerful people tipping the scales ever closer to the life under apartheid that they so loved.

I haven't ever made a movie recommendation in sermon but I suggest the movie, based on a true story: Black kklansman to take a look at how we are dangerously slipping backwards.

In the movie, you'll see an actor portraying David Duke, a former Louisiana State Representative. He is also a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. You'll see him being portrayed more than 30 years ago. At the end of the movie you'll see the real David Duke just a year ago spewing hate in Charlottesville.

It was once thought there'd always be apartheid in South Africa.

It was once thought there'd always be slavery in The United States.

It was once thought there'd always be segregation in our schools, restaurants, hotels, and water fountains.

It was once thought there would never be same sex marriage.

Not so long ago, Dave and I would have been arrested and Chip and David too, or worse, simply for loving our spouses.

Not so long ago, two men or two women couldn't have adopted a child together.

There was a time when most people gave no thought to someone who is wheel chair bound or differently abled. There were no special accommodations made.

But brave people stood up. Brave people spoke up. Brave people said, "This is wrong and must change." Brave people took Jesus's words outside of the church doors and lived into them out there in the world. Brave people persisted. And because of that, the world is a better place.

May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done. Amen.