

St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Sermon by Freya Gilbert
Sunday, September 8, 2024

Yes, we really did just hear Jesus call the Syro-Phoenician woman a dog. It's okay if you aren't okay with that. I'm not.

Some folks have tried to say...Oh, Jesus didn't really mean it, he was using peirastic irony. That's saying the opposite of what you mean to make a point. But rhetorical flourish doesn't excuse bad behavior. It's better to struggle with this passage than to engage in a theological game of twister.

The other route to take is to say that if Jesus did in fact become truly human, and that is what we believe, right there in the creeds, that to be human means to have growing edges, to face a learning curve. The Gospel of Luke in fact says that Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

You aren't sinning, Jesus wasn't sinning, if you are honestly encountering a moment which calls for growth and healing.

Randomly, the other day, I read a retelling of today's passage that substituted the word Arab for the word Syro-Phoenician. The geography tracks, I don't know about the genetics. But it helped me understand the tensions and pre-conceptions we are looking at in today's passage and that's why I'm going to use the word Arab from here on out. Jesus, a Jewish man encountering an Arab woman. That's a growing edge right there.

That's comforting, maybe. I think we can all look at attitudes and prejudices we've overcome.

Any of us who have engaged with the work of dismantling racism, of Building Beloved Community, have had to face hard truths about ourselves.

I'm reminded of the quote by Maya Angelou: Do the best you can until you know better. Then, when you know better, do better.

But I'm also reminded of a good friend of mine. She's about the same age as I

am, and she has a daughter who is in her thirties. Her daughter has significant learning impairment. And my friend had to fight so hard to get her daughter the education and help she deserves. Not every school back then had the capability, or even the desire, to offer Special Education. People threw the r word around, wouldn't let their children play with my friend's daughter, as if, as if, somehow a learning impairment was contagious.

My friend fought so hard for her daughter. She would come home exhausted and cry herself to sleep. But she also brought about lasting change in her community. She is a hero. She is a mother..

And as much as I embrace the hope and optimism of Maya Angelou's quote, I have to admit that sometimes our best just really isn't that good. My friend shouldn't have had to fight so hard. I ache when I think about how hard today's Arab woman had to fight.

People of color shouldn't have to fight as hard as they do.
And my community shouldn't have to fight as hard as it does, either.

Women should not have to fight so hard.

Helping people encounter their growing edges is hard, hard work.

Fighting for a place at the table is exhausting. And it's not fair. And I know what it felt like for my friend, and I know myself what it feels like for myself.

So, I have to admit something. When I look for God in today's passage, I have a hard time seeing God in Jesus' words and actions. I even have a hard time admitting that.

Certainly many people will lift up the Arab woman as a model of faith.

But the word faith doesn't even occur in today's passage, and to be frank, I need something that speaks to my heart in this passage. I'm struggling that hard with it.

And I found the thing that speaks to my heart this Friday. I drove three and a half hours to a little town in Ohio whose only claim to fame is that it was the birthplace of Neil Armstrong, the first human to walk on the moon. I spent a little more than hour there, and then I drove the three and a half hours back home.

I was at the house of a woman whose two and a half year old daughter is dying. Perfect, precious, beautiful Moyra has a genetic disorder so rare that she is only the fourth person diagnosed with it. I'm certain that Moyra has lived longer than the other three. But now Moyra is dying. And while I was there, I witnessed a phone conversation Moyra's mom had with one of the doctors. They were discussing whether or not the ventilator is something done for Moyra, or something being done to her. Moyra's mom had over ten miscarriages before carrying Moyra to term, and Moyra means Longed For Child, Wished For Child, Beloved One. And Moyra will always and forever be her mother's Beloved One. Moyra's mom will never stop fighting for her daughter, regardless of what that looks like.

I was there because the daughter of my heart, my daughter of choice has been there with her friend for over two weeks now, staying up all night every night with Moyra so mom can get some sleep. My daughter of choice puts in up to 20 hours a day being there for her friend and for Moyra. And she needed things from home, so I brought them to her.

I love my daughter of choice just because she exists, but her courage and selflessness and love fills my heart with more pride and love than I knew existed in the whole universe.

So when people talk about the faith of the Arab woman, I know better.

What I see is a mother's love. The love of the Arab woman for her tormented daughter. The love of my friend for her daughter who has a learning impairment. The love of Moyra's mom for her precious perfect daughter. My love for the daughter of my heart.

That's where I find God in today's passage. In a mother's love, in a mother's

heart.

And my friends, what I need for you to take with you this morning is just this.

God loves you, and me, just like the mothers in my stories this morning. God loves you like a mother. God is so proud of you. God will never give up on you. God will never stop fighting for you. God will never stop loving you.

Like a mother.