

A sermon preached on August 16th, 2020 based upon Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28 entitled "Letting Go of the 'Perfect Jesus' for the Jesus who Struggles as We Do, Allowing Himself to be Changed in the Crucible of Stress." The sermon followed a children's sermon on the story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis.

Many of us grew up with this image of the "perfect Jesus." We thought of Jesus as floating above the rest of humanity in this bubble of perfect serenity -- a Jesus who was immune from the pressures that come with being a human being, never getting stressed, never doing anything that might warrant the word "sin." The Gospel of John tends to give some support to this notion, but even there Jesus' full humanity Jesus slips through a times. In the other three Gospels however, what I would call the "stressed Jesus" is unmistakable.

It would certainly be accurate to say that Jesus handled stress far better than you or I do, as I suggested a couple of weeks ago when I talked about the way he -- in contrast to his disciples -- gracefully dealt with the stress of having their plans for a little vacation at a secluded place by the sea disrupted by the sudden appearance of a crowd of 5000 clamoring for his attention.

But as the Gospel story progresses, you can see the stress of Jesus grow in its intensity, and you can see it taking its toll on Jesus.

This morning's story comes from the 15th chapter of Matthew's Gospel and it's helpful to make a quick review of the events that come directly before it.

At the end of the 13th chapter Jesus goes back home for the first time in years to Nazareth -- the place he grew up -- and it doesn't go well. The people there refuse to let go of the view they had of him growing up and seem to resent the notion that Jesus has now been given by God some high and holy calling. They resist either his teaching or his gift for healing.

Think about what that must have felt like to be rejected by the people with whom you grew up.

In the 14th chapter Jesus hears about the execution of his friend John for calling out injustice, which grieves his heart, and also reminds him of what awaits him in Jerusalem. As I mentioned before, he sought out time alone to rest and grieve but the needs of the crowd of 5000 people brought an end to those plans.

At the beginning of the 15th chapter, we hear that Pharisees and scribes -- representatives of the religious establishment -- come all the way from their headquarters in Jerusalem to get a firsthand look at Jesus having heard from their colleagues in Galilee stories that distress them about his unorthodox theology, his claim that he was authorized to forgive sins, and his cavalier attitude towards the intricate laws of the Holiness code in Leviticus that prescribe precisely how people should live in order to be holy, undefiled. They disturbed by the company he keeps -- people who in their mind are clearly unholy sinners.

Being in conflict with the authorities – with people of power – well, that’s highly stressful.

If you are familiar with the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. than you know that as time passed and he increasingly incurred the wrath of the authorities who sought to defend the status quo -- well he lived under excruciating stress.

Jesus’ meeting with the religious authorities -- well, let us say, it didn’t go well. With all that is wrong with the world their main concern seems to be why his followers aren’t washing their hands before eating -- which sets Jesus off, lashing into them for their hypocrisy – the ways they cleverly work around the requirements of the law to take advantage of people while maintaining their self-congratulatory postures as one of the righteous ones.

The meeting doesn’t go well, and at this point any notion of forging some kind of working relationship with the religious authorities has pretty much evaporated.

And so in the first part of the reading for today Jesus calls the crowd to him -- this crowd made up to a large extent with the sort of unclean “sinners” that the religious authorities think he shouldn’t be so cozy with -- poor, Jewish peasants without the time or energy to keep track of the minutia of the dietary laws because they’re just scraping by to survive.

They gather around him and Jesus gets to the crux of the matter.

Defilement isn’t about whether you keep the kosher laws perfectly. It’s not about what you put in your mouth, he says. No, defilement is a matter of what’s in your heart.

As Jesus said elsewhere, the heart of the law is to love God with your whole heart, soul and mind and your neighbor as yourself, and just because you follow the dietary laws fastidiously or for that matter, you can quote the Bible inside and out -- none of that matters if you aren’t someone through who love is at work.

Jesus says that we can be exquisitely clean on the outside, giving off the appearance of refinement and respectability, and yet have a heart that is a cesspool -- a toxic sewage dump. And unless we are willing to look into our hearts, shine light into the darkness within, well we can count on the toxic sewage leaking out into our actions, sometimes in ways that are unmistakable – as when, say we suddenly lose it with our kid over some little thing, or when Joseph’s brothers let their resentment build up to the point where they commit such cruelty to their little brother -- and other times in more subtle, deceptive, manipulative ways where the harm is disguised allowing us to cling to the pretense of being one of the “good” people.

And here's the thing. Inside all of us there is both sin and grace, love and hate, light and darkness, toxicity and health. We are all made in the image and likeness of God, **and** we are also all sons and daughters of Adam and Eve.

Times of increased stress such as the one we are presently living through have a way of bringing out both the light and the darkness that is within us. We hear stories of the best and worst of humanity -- stories of wonderful acts of kindness and compassion, as well as pettiness, selfishness and cruelty.

After Jesus spells out the heart of the matter to the crowd he tries yet again to get away with his disciples for a time of rest. He goes to a place where it would be reasonable to expect he could find some peace and quiet. He goes to the district of Tyre and Sidon the significance of which is that it's Gentile territory – and since he's a Jew and Gentiles and Jews traditionally kept their distance from one another he can expect to be left alone. No Pharisees to argue with and no needy people clamoring for his attention and healing touch.

Except mysteriously there is one person with a great need, and she's a very loud one at that.

A Canaanite woman who lives in the region and has heard of Jesus extraordinary healing ministry finds out that he's ventured into her territory and somehow figures out exactly where he is. How she figures this out isn't explained, but there is no one quite so focused, so willing to go to any length, than a mother with a very sick child.

Jesus has been hanging out with the outsiders within his own Jewish community, those who are outcast by virtue of being considered unclean for their failures to keep the intricate details of the law. But this Gentile woman is a whole other level of outsider.

She begins shouting, *"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."* It's a striking detail that this Canaanite woman addresses Jesus as, *"Son of David"* because it's an explicit title for the Jewish messiah. It's a term which up to this point in the story nobody has spoken in reference to Jesus. Remarkably, this Gentile woman intuits this mysterious Jesus is the Jewish messiah before any of the Jews do.

Jesus' first response to the woman's shouting is to say nothing at all. We can imagine what he's thinking, though. *"Even here, can I find no rest?"*

As with the crowd of 5000 before, the disciples want this woman to just go away, and so they come to Jesus, urging him to send her packing. Jesus first response to the woman is to say, *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel."* Up to this point this is how Jesus has understood the mission God has given him. *"Sorry, lady, but a rule's a rule,"* especially, perhaps when you're exhausted and the rule provides a convenient excuse by which to dismiss somebody

But the woman persists. She draws close to Jesus, invading his personal space, and yet she does so with a humble spirit. She kneels before him, saying simply, *“Lord, help me.”*

Now people who cling to the notion of the *“perfect Jesus”* – the Jesus who lives on an altogether different plain from the one the rest of us live in – feel obliged to try and explain away the next words that come out of Jesus’ mouth. But if we are honest, I think we have to acknowledge that what Jesus says here is simply mean. Cruel. That some bit of toxic sludge inside of Jesus suddenly rises to the surface. He says, *“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”* Jesus is saying, *“Woman, you are not a child of God. You are merely a dog. You are less than fully human.”* This is simply racist. This is appalling. This is not what we expect from Jesus.

It is important to note that Jesus says these words after an accumulation of an incredible amount of stress. He is, after all, a human being. He’s experienced rejection, grief, conflict and exhaustion. Nonetheless if this is where the story ended, I think we’d have reason to turn away from Jesus.

Thank God, though for what happens next. The woman responds to Jesus’ insult by simply saying, *“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”* It is as if she is incapable of taking offense. Her laser focus is on love – on her daughter’s need for healing – and on the great love she intuitively is in Jesus even if he himself is at this moment out of touch with this love.

The woman’s words shift something inside Jesus. A hardness born of accumulated stress melts away. A new awareness of the infinite width and breadth of his mission suddenly takes hold. He stands in awe of the faith present in this woman. *“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”* And her daughter was healed instantly.

Along with the image of the *“perfect Jesus”* is the idea of the *“static Jesus”*, which is to say that in the course of his life Jesus never changed, never grew, never came to see life from a new, deeper perspective. But the Jesus who struggles with stress as we do also is a Jesus who is willing to learn, to grow, to see life from a new deeper perspective. Thanks to this woman he recognizes the mission God is calling him to is far broader than he had imagined.

These are strange, stressful times we are living under. We are limited in where we can go, what we can do. Unable to go far and wide, such a time as this provides us with an opportunity – should we choose to avail ourselves to it – to go deeper – to do some soul work. To do what I think Joseph did in prison when he went from being a brat to being an instrument of God’s grace and mercy.

In times of disruption of and distress there is on some level of a being a choice to be made, one that won’t necessarily be made all at once, but gradually over time, and that is either to hunker down and enthrone our fears and resentments and harden our old world view, or to allow ourselves to be humbled, taught by people we would never have imagined learning anything from, and transformed as one who walks more closely with Jesus.

