

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Alive in Creation: 50 groups/individuals Jesus says you can hate
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Deuteronomy 7:1-11, Matthew 15:21-39

I'll admit it: I clicked on it. I followed the link that came up in my Facebook feed. It was just too tempting. The title read: "50 groups/individuals Jesus says you can hate." Curiosity got the better of me.

I'll spare you from the same fate I suffered: it was an eye-rolling disappointment. After introducing the list as a scripturally-founded compilation of all those people we are not required by Jesus to love and show mercy toward, after giving us permission to scorn, deride, demonize, and condemn everybody on this list, the piece culminates in a numbered list, 1-50, with nothing but blank space next to each one.

The first thought that came to my head was, "well, duh." Big surprise. We all know Jesus taught us to love our enemies, bless those who persecute us, welcome the stranger and the outcast, care for the poor and the widow. All Jesus talks about is love and expanding the circle of God's love to those who would seem to be outsiders. But then we read today's text, and it seems that maybe there is one person, at least, who it seems might be on this list of people Jesus says it's okay to hate.

Jesus and his disciples have just entered the district of Tyre and Sidon. Now, these names don't mean much to us today, though they are still port cities in Lebanon. But for Jesus and his disciples, this would have been like entering New York City, or the Hamptons. Or, maybe Birmingham and Bloomfield. These were regions of wealth and privilege. They were major trade cities on the Mediterranean Sea, a channel for goods from Macedonia and Egypt, all of the known world, to the inlands of first-century Palestine.

And just as Jesus and his crew hit 14-mile and Woodward, this woman comes along, let's call her Sally, since scripture seems to have trouble remembering women's names. Sally has a child possessed by a demon, a child with special needs, a child who doesn't behave, a child who says bad words, a child who is addicted to drugs, who abuses alcohol, who is mentally ill, who is a bully, who is gay, who is transgender. Sally has spent her life concealing her daughter's condition, apologizing for it, spending vast sums of money on phony physicians and experimental remedies. She's learned to be her daughter's advocate and defender, even as this has caused her to lose friends and become alienated by her family.

This woman is not Jewish. The gospel of Mark calls her Syrophenician, a description from the first-century landscape. But Matthew labels her a Canaanite, tying her to the people-group driven out of the Holy Land when the people of Israel arrived. She probably looks like a Syrian. She might be the ancestor of Muslims. Maybe she worships the Canaanite gods Baal, Ashera, or Melkart. Or perhaps under the influence of the surrounding cultures she worships the Roman emperor, or the Greek pantheon. Or

maybe she's an atheist. And maybe that's why Jesus feels like he can ignore her, call her names, dare I say, hate her. Calling someone a female dog in ancient Aramaic is not any nicer than it sounds in 21st century English.

Maybe Jesus had his reasons to hate and insult this woman, but isn't this the same Jesus who taught people to "love their enemies" and to value mercy over legal technicalities? Didn't he welcome women and tax collectors, sinners and outcasts into his tribe of followers? Where does this exclusionary and offensive behavior come from? It is totally inconsistent with the rest of Jesus' life and ministry.

Plenty of preachers and commentators have attempted to explain this scene as Jesus acting within the context of his culture. He might be divine, but as a human, he is still subject to human cultural norms. And his poor treatment of this woman is overshadowed by the fact that in the end he changes his mind and heals a person of Canaanite descent. Isn't that radical?

But I'm sorry, I can't believe in a Jesus who would ignore and insult any woman who has a child with special needs begging for help. There's no excuse for that. There's a lot I don't understand about God in Jesus Christ, and today this just has to be one of those things. I can't excuse or explain what Jesus does here and turn it into a feel-good after-school special about inclusion and compassion. I just have to sit uncomfortably with this episode.

And this may be the only time you ever hear me say this, but it is unfortunate that many churches model Jesus' behavior in this situation. We've all heard that Sunday morning is the most segregated time of the week in America, and there is good reason for that. Because we are modeling Jesus' behavior. We are the church for those who look like us, believe like us, behave like us, belong to our tribe. We are sent only to the educated, the suburbanites, the English-speakers, the literate, the sober, the gainfully employed. We are sent only to the white, or the black, or the Latino. We are sent only to the Catholic, or the Chaldean, or the Baptist, or the Presbyterian. The church does a spectacular job of narrowing the scope of her mission. Well done in following in the footsteps of Jesus.

And so the miracle that takes place in this text is not the healing of Sally's daughter. The miracle is that Sally sticks around long enough to demand it. When she is excluded and insulted, she doesn't storm off in a huff and bad-mouth Jesus and his followers. She doesn't return evil for evil, ignoring or insulting Jesus in response. She turns the other cheek. She humbles herself. She models the kind of behavior we'd expect from, well, Jesus.

And she uses the same kind of rhetoric and wordplay that we see Jesus use throughout his ministry and teaching. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." She is not asking to be included. She is not offering to convert. She is not hoping to be anything more than a dog to Jesus.

The faith that Jesus commends in her is not a conversion to Judaism or to a not-yet-existent Christianity. Her faith is not belief in Jesus as the Jewish messiah.

Sally's faith is the trust that with Jesus, even Jesus at his worst, things can get better. It is a faith that Jesus can do better. It is a faith that stands up and demands mercy, justice, and truth. It is a faith that does not slink back into self-pity. It does not run home and vent about "those people" and post on Facebook about how we've been wronged. It is a faith like Jacob's that wrestles with God and demands a blessing, even if we get injured in the process. It is a faith that will not accept absolutes and status quo and "that's just the way it is."

I don't know if this woman changed Jesus' mind, or if this was all a set-up for her to demonstrate her faith. But I do know that after this encounter, Jesus heals and feeds a crowd of thousands of non-Jews. There is no more of this "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" business. We've got an election happening this week, folks. And plenty of churches around this country feel like they are the church only for Republicans, or Democrats, or Libertarians, or people who think we shouldn't vote for anybody. I hope we don't model Jesus' behavior this week.

Instead, I hope we model Sally's behavior, which in this case happens to be more Christ-like than Christ's. I hope we demonstrate a faith that believes that the Body of Christ, even at its worst, has the power to heal, to make things better. A faith that looks past our political parties and tribes and divisions and demands mercy and justice and truth. A faith that doesn't walk away hurt, that doesn't respond in kind to wrongdoing, that doesn't ignore offensive behavior. Let's have that kind of faith this week. Let's be that kind of church. Because that is the faith that leads to healing.

If you want to join me on Election Day this Tuesday, I will be here from the time the polls open here at the church until they close. This is my polling place, my community, my church. And we will be showing hospitality, handing out coffee, fostering conversation, encouraging kindness and patience, promoting mercy and humility and peace – all day long. We will do this as we plead and pray for healing.

And we will invite the whole community to come together on Wednesday evening here in the sanctuary to pray for healing and hope for our nation. Like the Canaanite woman, we will witness to the truth that God's blessing, God's healing, God's promises are not exclusive. With humility and reverence, with courage and perseverance, we will pray that God heals this country possessed by fear and partisanship, hatred and anger and contempt. We will demand scraps from the table if we must, but we believe that the Body of Christ can cast out these demons and restore us to life.

Because we are Everybody's Church. And we do believe that the list of those we are permitted to hate is blank. And when we behave to the contrary, we are grateful for those who remind us to see that everyone is welcome at Christ's table, and everyone is worthy of God's healing, and everyone is a child of God. Amen.