

Stop! In the Name of Love
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Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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.' 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.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

Not long ago here at Lorraine Avenue we heard the story of the Gerasene demoniac, a man from whom Jesus set unclean spirits free. After the healing, Jesus told the man who had once lived in the tombs on the outskirts of town to go back into the city and tell everyone what God had done for him. The townspeople were afraid of all this and sent Jesus away. A post by David R. Henson from a blog called Edges of Faith tells why the story might have ended this way. "In...one terrifying moment, Jesus turned things upside down and the townspeople were revealed for who they really were. It filled them with great fear because they realized **they were the kind of people who tortured, who brutalized, who ostracized the living to the places of the dead because they were different, troubled, scary, or just didn't fit the mold.**"

Our main character this morning, the Canaanite woman, is also an outsider, and she sure doesn't fit the Jewish mold. Her people worship multiple gods and are considered pagan by Jesus and his disciples. She, like the man in the earlier story, is negatively impacted by a demon. "Great. Another demon." I can just hear the disciples, complaining about their much-needed retreat being interrupted by yet another stranger. Jesus' words echo that sentiment of frustration, even scorn. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

What's unique about this story compared to the first one is that, here, Jesus can be viewed as the learner, and we see him stop in his tracks. After chiding her for coming to bother them and calling her a dog—what amounts to a racial slur—he stops. She asserts her humanity and he sees it. She is not a dog and she's not leaving. She wants peace for her daughter. Instead of continuing to ostracize her, Jesus moves from the posture of one who wields power over another to the posture of one who sees another's power and validates it—reflects it back to her.

This woman who took an incredible risk in standing up to abuse shows Jesus how she wants to be treated and, in doing so, makes the world safe for her daughter again as she hears Jesus' great words of affirmation, "Let it be done for you as you wish."

Every day I wonder what could happen if I, if we, if more people everywhere, especially people who say they love God and go to church, could stop in the name of that vast and crazy love, think over our actions, and work systematically to make our culture one where validation happens, where power is handed back, and where we practice saying how we want to be treated and asking others how they want to be treated.

I wonder these things because, if you can't tell, I'm a big fan of this Canaanite woman. I love the faith and courage with which she moves forward. I love her non-defensive way of stating her vulnerability, showing her problem-solving skills (that brilliant line "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table"), and leaving space for Jesus to think and respond in kind.

We can live like this. Many of you do. I try to, and it is a very halting endeavor studded with teeny, tiny victories. Baby steps, right?

We can live like this, and if we practice being Canaanite women together, we can be families, congregations, schools, organizations, businesses, cultures who face their demons, grow through conflict and create more peace and safety in the world.

Recent days and years (decades--let's get real) have brought significant conflict to our denomination and its conferences around a double standard: LGBTQ folk will be excluded from leadership and church weddings/membership on the basis of their sexual orientation. Heterosexual folks will be included in leadership and weddings/rites of the church on the basis of their sexual orientation until such time as the public learns of a sexual indiscretion on the part of a clergy member/institutional employee.

Almost a year ago at the MC USA biennial conference in Kansas City, Pink Menno acted as a collective Canaanite woman to bring to our awareness the ways LGBTQ folks in our denomination are prevented from holding positions of church leadership and, generally, pushed to the margins and ostracized. Instead of asking, "How would you like to be treated?" or saying "Let it be done for you as you wish," our denomination has said there's no food to share and no room at the table. Queer people not welcome here.

Late last year, a respected straight male member of First Mennonite Church in Newton was arrested for aggravated indecent liberties with a minor.

Early this year, the straight vice president for enrollment of Eastern Mennonite University was charged with solicitation of prostitution. In mid-April of this year, through the powerful platform of the blog *Our Stories Untold*, his sexual abuse of a former student was shared with the Mennonite and wider world.

Three weeks ago now, just hours or days after the Orlando Massacre, many of us who didn't already know began to learn about why it cut so deeply for this hate crime to have been committed in a gay bar. Stories were shared of how places like Pulse are sanctuaries--cherished places of safety, sacredness and trust for LGBTQ people.

How can Lorraine Avenue and all churches, like Pulse, be places of safety where people are cherished and sacredness and power are reflected back to those who enter our doors? How can we keep children safe and reflect their power back to them? How do we create a culture where survivors of any age feel safe, free, and empowered to speak out, name names, and say how they want to be treated?

These questions are near and dear to me not only because, with you, I want the children, men and women of our church to feel safe and free, but also because I grew up in a family where child sexual abuse happened, and I have an idea what it might feel like for a child to come of age in a place where there is no safe sanctuary or avenue for finding help to get out of abusive relationships. Where there is no Canaanite woman practice, there is little consideration of what one prefers or does not prefer. In such oppressive settings Jesus is

consigned to the boss role and we, the townspeople, don't take up the work of facing our demons, or learning from the Jesus who took the challenge to face his own.

What I am hearing as I talk with Barbra Graber and Stephanie Krehbiel and the online community of Pink Mennos and SNAP Anabaptist chapter folks as well as Kathy Wiens, a writer, long-time child advocate and safe sanctuary trainer (and Ruth Wiens' mom) from First Mennonite Church in Newton, is that the most important things we can do to help our kids and congregation enjoy healthy sexuality and safe boundaries is to teach consent, to validate, validate, validate, and get professional outside help whenever indicated. An upcoming Western District Conference workshop for pastors should shed more light on the when/how/where of professional help for church-based abuse cases. What does not feel safe to speak will not be spoken. What does not feel safe to share will not be heard.

In that spirit, I close this time with these words adapted from what Kathy Wiens shared at First Mennonite. If you are experiencing sexual desires regarding children, please do not keep that a secret. Tell someone you trust and get professional help. If you know someone who experiences sexual desire for children, please speak up. It is vitally important that adults at risk for offending get the support and accountability they need and deserve. To any survivors of sexual abuse, thank you for being here today. You are wonderful, no matter where you are in your journey of healing. If Lorraine Avenue is not a safe place for you to speak out, it is not safe for any of us. Your story matters.

Children, if someone touches your body in a way you don't like, or if someone touches the private, personal parts of your body like your lips, chest, or the parts of your body that are covered by underwear, it's not your fault and you need to tell a trusted adult. If someone makes you feel uncomfortable by the things they say or show you about your body, their body, or someone else's body, you can also tell someone about that. It's okay to tell a trusted adult. A trusted adult is someone you feel safe with.

We are wonderful people, made in God's image. I hope each one of you here this morning has at least one, and hopefully many, people who reflect this wonder and the vast and crazy love of God back to you and with whom you can do Canaanite woman practice by saying how you want to be treated and listening for how they want to be treated.