



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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From the Fury

Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, August 20, 2017
The eleventh Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 15:21-28.

After the week that has passed, I suppose it's not entirely surprising that we have a Gospel reading about bigotry. What is surprising is that the bigotry is displayed by Jesus.

That's right, Jesus.

Here he is, traveling in an unnamed woman's country—Tyre and Sidon—and a Canaanite woman approaches him, from a distance, crying out for mercy for her daughter. He doesn't answer her at all. Not one word. She keeps calling after him, shouting for mercy for her tormented daughter. Jesus continues to ignore her. The disciples get annoyed at her constant cries, and finally ask Jesus to send her away.

So, at last, he responds to her. But not as we might expect. He spurns her, saying "I was sent only to the sheep of the house of Israel." Well, as a Canaanite, she certainly wasn't that—the Canaanites were the original people of the land who were mostly conquered by Moses and Joshua, and who were blamed for introducing the Israelites to the worship of the Baals.¹ So there's a historical enmity between Jesus' people and hers.

At last the woman draws near to him and kneels to him. "Lord, help me," is all she says. Jesus' reply is cutting even two thousand years later. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," he answers her. But she says back to him, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." At this point, Jesus exclaims, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!" And her daughter, we are told, was instantly healed.

Happy ending, right?

Well, yes, the ending is happy enough. But I've poured over various Bible commentaries looking for an answer, and none of them makes this story any less rough, any easier to bear, for me. Because Jesus' behavior is genuinely shocking here. He insults the woman, calling her and her tormented daughter dogs, in comparison with the beloved children of Israel.

If you believe Aaron M. Gall's commentary in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, the disciples may have been asking him to perform the exorcism, if only to get rid of her. Which means that the disciples, who are usually pretty clueless in the Gospels, are actually showing more mercy than Jesus is at this point in the story. She is a Canaanite, so to him she is a dog—less than human. How do we deal with that?

This story troubled me for years, because it's so different from the Jesus we usually meet. I could never really believe the apologists who said he was just testing her faith, or testing the disciples, because I couldn't imagine Jesus putting a woman tortured with anxiety and fear for her daughter through such a test, or using her as a teaching tool.

No, it was, of all people, the agnostic playwright George Bernard Shaw who helped me see my way through this passage. Let me explain.

Shaw wrote prefaces to his plays that were sometimes longer than the plays—essays on subjects related to the play, if only a little bit. In 1915, he published a play retelling the story of Androcles and the Lion. That's the old fable about a tailor who finds a lion with a thorn in its paw, and, feeling sorry for it, removes the thorn. Later, Androcles is thrown by the Romans into the arena with a group of other Christians, only for the lion to remember him and to protect him. Shaw's play is about Christian faith in times of persecution, and just what Christians believed. So of course he appended a 100-page exegesis of all four gospels.

Here's what I learned about the story of the Canaanite woman from Bernard Shaw.

In all four gospels, there is nobody who beats Jesus in a verbal joust—except for this one nameless, foreign, desperate woman. She wins the argument by her humility, her insistence that the crumbs of mercy that fall from the table of the children will suffice to save her child. In other words, she believes in Jesus when his own behavior has given her no reason to.

Shaw describes the story as “somehow one of the most touching in the Gospel; perhaps because the woman rebukes the prophet by a touch of his own finest quality.” And he's right. Shaw acknowledges that Jesus' behavior toward her is “certainly out of character,” even describing it as bigoted, in the way of many people of his time, and describes her as having melted the bigot out of him and “made Christ a Christian” when he wasn't acting as one.

As he says, she rebukes the prophet with a touch of his own finest quality—that loving openness that, for whatever reason, he couldn't muster that day. We don't know why—fatigue? His own town's recent rejection of him? The frustration of being sought after as a show but not heard? It's a terribly human moment on Jesus' part, and the woman recalls him back to himself.

Just this once, Jesus gets as much as he gives in a miracle story. He's come back to himself, as he describes the prodigal son in Luke's gospel. Just this once he needed to be called back to his truest, best self. And it was the other, the hereditary enemy, the woman of another people, the dog, who was there for him.

I think many of us, certainly I, need to be called back to our truest, best selves after these past days.

Look, you've probably read the wise statements from our bishops—from our own rector, Bishop Dean Wolfe,² from our Diocesan Bishop, Andrew Dietsche,³ and from our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry. I can't match them for wisdom or insight, and I'm not going to try. But maybe I can help if, like me, you are finding it hard to let go of that smoldering anger, after watching video of angry faces bathed in torchlight, Nazi flags proudly waving and Nazi armbands proudly worn. If it's hard to let go of the anger after the attacks on anti-racist protesters, leading to the death of Heather Heyer and the wounding of 19 others trapped in that narrow street with her. We don't know how many others were hurt that day, never mind what they lived through in these attacks, some of which devolved into pitched battles. All in the name of a White Supremacist ideology, of Nazism, of the Ku Klux Klan—old specters risen again to stalk our land. A part of our national story we hoped was in retreat, if not entirely vanquished.

The further tears in our already battered national unity that have resulted in the past week as equivocal and weak official responses have led those who hold those unabashedly evil ideologies to claim that they have gone mainstream have roused anger nationwide, and justly so. In Boston yesterday we have seen those ideologists routed by peaceful protests, responding in anger, yes, but not with hatred. Because righteous anger can all too

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easily curdle into hate. In our minds, we know this: that righteous anger leads all too easily to unrighteous behavior, like the old military theory of replication postulates, that those defending civil society over time take on the attributes of those they oppose.

But that's too abstract. I have to go back to Shaw again. In his play *St. Joan* the chaplain who has argued throughout her trial that Joan is a heretic returns from her execution in tears and horror. He says, "You don't know: you haven't seen: it is so easy to talk when you don't know. You madden yourself with words: you damn yourself because it feels grand to throw oil on the flaming hell of your own temper. But when it is brought home to you; when you see the thing you have done; when it is blinding your eyes, stifling your nostrils, tearing your heart, then—" Then it is all too late, of course. So what do we do to quench the anger? Where do we look? Heather Heyer put her body on the line to protest against white supremacy that day in Charlottesville. A lot of people did—women and men, clergy and lay, students and professors, people from all races and orientations and all walks of life. She and they thought that risk worth it. She and every single person, all who stood on that line in peaceful opposition to White Supremacy in all its ugly guises, point us in the right direction. The vast crowd that turned out in Boston to oppose neo-Nazism and White Supremacy in all of its variants, and did so peacefully, point us in the right direction.

But if we need it in words—and I admit, I do sometimes need it spelled out for me in words—let's listen to Mark Heyer. Last week, Mark Heyer, whose daughter Heather was killed when a grey Dodge Charger plowed through a crowd of protesters in Charlottesville who had assembled to demonstrate against a gathering of White Supremacists there, pointed to the Cross.

Here is what he said: "My daughter was a strong woman who had passionate opinions about the equality of everyone, and she tried to stand up for that. And for her it wasn't lip service; it was real. It was something that she wanted to share with everyone. And my thoughts with all of this stuff is that people need to stop hating and they need to forgive each other. I include myself in that forgiving the guy that did this. He don't know no better. I just think about what the Lord said on the cross. Lord, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing,"

If Mark Heyer, in the hour of his greatest desolation, can call us to our best selves, who are we not to listen?

1 Aaron M. Gall, "The Gospel According to Matthew," in Amy-Jill Levine & Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* at 29 (2011).

2 <https://www.diocesenya.org/bishop-dietsche-on-charlottesville/>

3. <http://stbarts.org/statement-in-response-to-the-violence-in-charlottesville-virginia/>