

The Rev. Jay Lawlor “God’s Expansive Love” – Sermon for August 20, 2017

The Rev. Jay Lawlor preached and presided at Saint Paul's Episcopal Church, Richmond, IN on Aug. 20, 2017.

INDIANAPOLIS, IN, US, February 22, 2018 /EINPresswire.com/ -- [The Rev. Jay Lawlor](#) preached a [sermon](#) titled "God's Expansive Love" for the 11th Sunday After Pentecost at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Indiana. The Rev. Lawlor said in his sermon:

This week's lesson from the Gospel According to Matthew teaches us about the expansiveness of God's love and healing. But it doesn't come to us in the usual way we expect. Parts of Jesus' words are even difficult to hear as they were informed by the racial and ethnic prejudices of his own culture: for example, referring to the Canaanite

woman as a dog. It is important that Jesus ultimately responds to the woman with love and mercy. As followers of Jesus, it is also important for us to reflect on how Jesus got there.



Michael Angelo Immenraet - Jesus and the Woman of Canaan. Creative Commons License.

In the verses which precede the scene of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, there is a controversy over Jewish purity laws. The Pharisees are trying to bait Jesus into discussing Jewish purity laws to catch him and the disciples at fault for not strictly obeying them. Jesus wants no part of it as there are, from Jesus' perspective, more important matters to tend to. Jesus says: “Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” (Matthew 15:10, NRSV)

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In response to Peter, Jesus expands on this and says: “But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.” (Matthew 15:18, NRSV) Jesus is less concerned about purity laws with respect to eating practices and more concerned about what is on a person's heart and how they express that. Is it in accordance with the commandment to love God and neighbor or is infected with those things which are the opposite of love? Jesus says it is those things which are the opposite of love that defile.

Jesus is telling us that words matter, and can be powerful, because they reveal what is in our hearts.

Words reveal what we think and believe at our core. Words can have lasting impact – for good, or for ill. So Jesus' reflections on how words can defile is particularly instructive as he encounters the Canaanite woman.

The particular scene with the Canaanite woman begins with Jesus and his disciples going into the region of Tyre and Sidon. They are outside the symbolic boundaries of Israel and, therefore, inhabited by Gentiles. Jews in Jesus' day did not typically enter the regions where Gentiles lived. As Jesus and his disciples enter the region, Matthew's Gospel tells us:

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." (Matthew 15:22-23, NRSV)

Jesus' initial reaction is to ignore the woman. Canaanites were native to Palestine and Jews did not associate with them. Especially Jewish men did not associate with Canaanite women. In fact, a Canaanite woman was, in a Jewish man of Jesus' days eyes, a second class citizen at best. So how Jesus first reacts to the woman is both shocking for us and, yet, not out of what might be expected from a Jewish man in his day. Jesus, under Jewish custom, had no obligation to acknowledge the Canaanite woman. So he doesn't.

Jesus' disciples plead with him to tell her to go away because she keeps shouting after them. Despite Jesus ignoring her and walking on, the Canaanite woman was loud and persistent. She knew who Jesus was and what he could do. She knew he had healed others. All she wanted was what every mother would want, healing for her child.

When his disciples ask Jesus to send the woman away, Jesus doesn't even want to be bothered with the effort. He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matthew 15:24, NRSV)

But the Canaanite woman persists. She knows Jesus can deliver healing for her daughter. The exchange between the Canaanite woman and Jesus is powerful:

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. (Matthew 15:25-28, NRSV)

Canaanites, especially Canaanite women, were used to being discriminated against. They knew of a history of racial and ethnic prejudice against them. Jesus grew up in a culture of racial and ethnic prejudice toward Canaanites. While the Christ, Jesus was also fully human. As a human being he was, at least in part, formed by his culture – including his culture's prejudices.

It is a hard passage for us to hear as Christians. But it is also a powerful witness to the transforming love and mercy of God. Yes, in that moment, the fully human Jesus spoke words and expressed an attitude in keeping with his culture's racial and ethnic prejudices. But Jesus did not let that be the final word or attitude. [...]

The complete text of the Rev. Jay Lawlor's sermon is available at

<https://www.therevjaylawlor.com/gods-expansive-love-the-rev-jay-lawlor-sermon-for-11-pentecost-year-a-aug-20-2017/>

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