I am always astonished by the way Canaanite woman speaks to Jesus! She is way too aggressive and confrontational for me. But I think she had to be bold to get past the cultural norms of her day, past the disciples’ annoyance, and past Jesus’ hesitation to hear her. The Canaanite Woman boldly approached Jesus, the One who held power over her life, and she did not flinch. She knew what she wanted, and she knew what was right. She knew that Jesus was the key to new and abundant life, and the Canaanite Woman wanted a piece of it; not for herself, but for her daughter who was unable to seek Jesus’ healing for herself.

This woman had *chutzpah*! If you are not familiar with this Yiddish term, it comes from a Hebrew word (*huspah*) meaning “insolence,” “cheek,” or “audacity.” The Canaanite woman had the insolence to step out of her assigned place in society, the cheek to speak her mind to Jesus, and the audacity to demand that he right this wrong.

Her persistence wore Jesus down, and her faith in Jesus lead to the healing of her daughter. Her consistent belief in Jesus' power to bring transformation upends Jesus' initial hesitation and the disciples' expectations. I believe our world needs more of such astonishing reversals. We could use a whole culture of Canaanite women and men who refuse to be left unseen, unheard, and who refuse to be dismissed until their children can live demon-free.

The Canaanite woman would not slink away in shame or be silenced until her daughter is healed. That kind of relentless faith-work is what we need to summon in this season of racial reckoning and pandemic devastation. Access to a seat at the table may still be denied to some, but those on the margins and those standing with them, cannot turn back until all people are seen and heard. So, I wonder:

* What would the Canaanite woman do about families with no health insurance?
* What would the Canaanite woman do about the lives lost to gun violence?
* What would the Canaanite woman do about the impending eviction crisis?
* What would the Canaanite woman do about crushing, student debt?
* What would the Canaanite woman do about mass incarceration?
* What would the Canaanite woman do about food insecurity?
* What would the Canaanite woman do about COVID-19?

Writer and activist Audre Lorde once said: "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood." After getting a dire diagnosis that she feared would end her life, Lorde reflected on her life and hopes and came to understand that "what I regretted most were my silences." She asked her audience: "What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?"

The Canaanite woman refused to stay silent. She refused to swallow the tyrannies that would kill her and her daughter if she did not speak up, shout out, and stand firm until Jesus acted on her request. The Canaanite woman’s story begs the questions: What do you need to say? What do we as the church need to say? What silences do we look back on and regret? When did we keep silent or silence others in the face of systems, structures, and polices that allowed the evil to run rampant and destroy the Canaanite woman's little girl? These are big questions, though questions, with no easy answers.

As we read the news and watch this pandemic's impact unequally injure those already pushed to the margins and eating the crumbs, what will we say? Who will we be in this transformation story? Will we be like the disciples trying to dismiss the problem? Will we be like Jesus, at first choosing to mind our own business and take care only of our own? Or will we be the Canaanite Woman speaking truth to power, demanding what is fair and what is right, and refusing to be silent until things change?

I am truly challenged by the Canaanite Woman. Her assertive manner makes me uncomfortable, but it also makes me think. Am I willing to stand with her? Will I refuse to be silenced when lives are at stake? Can I persist with those who have the power to make a difference for those unable to advocate for themselves? Will I stop making others swallow tyrannies that will sicken and kill them? Am I able, as the Canaanite woman did and as Audre Lorde argued, to break the silences and bridge the difference between us, "for it is not the difference that immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken."

What would the Canaanite woman do? She would not be silent. She would persist. She would demand change and do her part to achieve it. Even if it means confronting Jesus himself. I imagine Jesus smiled, thinking back on the encounter. I bet he admired her conviction and her tenacity. For, in a sense, what the Canaanite Woman did by standing up for her daughter, foreshadowed what Jesus would do for us on the cross. When we were unable to stand up for ourselves due to sin, Jesus stood in for us at the cross, taking our sins upon himself and dying that we might live free.

Right now, the Canaanite woman's resolve to get Jesus' intervention speaks loudly to my soul. I need to channel her tenacity and persistence. I need to model her humility and strength. I need to harness her stalwart commitment to seek help on behalf of those unable to speak for themselves. I need to remember her unwillingness to be dismissed, not even by Jesus.

Confronted by the Canaanite woman, Jesus did the right thing. He healed. He forged new relationships. He opened hearts. He changed attitudes. He righted a wrong. He enriched the world. This story reminds us of the power our voice has to make a difference when joined with God’s power and presence.

Prayer: Lord, Jesus Christ who reached across the ethnic boundaries between Samaritan, Canaanite, Roman, and Jew who offered fresh sight to the blind and freedom to captives, help us to break down the barriers in our community, enable us to see the reality of racism and bigotry, and free us to challenge and uproot it from ourselves, our society and our world. For the sake of your children, we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Source:

* Jill Duffield, “Looking into the Lectionary.” The Presbyterian Outlook. presoutlook@pres-outlook.org. August 10, 2020.
* Audre Lorde. “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action.” December 28, 1977.

<https://electricliterature.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/silenceintoaction.pdf>. Retrieved August 10, 2020.

**What Would the Canaanite** **Woman Do?**

Sunday, August 16, 2020 Matthew 15:21-28

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Most of you are familiar with the abbreviation WWJD. It stands for “What would Jesus Do?”. WWJD is commonly portrayed as a management and leadership principle urging us to go to the marketplace and preach and lead by example, just as Jesus did. This week, as I reflected on the story of the Canaanite woman, I asked myself: WWTCWD? What would the Canaanite woman do if she lived in our world?

We live in complex and troubling times. There are more real-life problems than we can shake proverbial sticks at, and precious few solutions. It sometimes feels as if God is absent, as if Jesus does not respond to the cries of the suffering, and as if the Holy Spirit is no longer working to restore the world. Consequently, our anxiety is bleeding through, coloring everything we say and do; and our stress is coming out as anger toward others. In such a hostile environment, the Canaanite woman feels like a good role model in the faith, the person whose wisdom seems most applicable to daily life.

In our story, the Canaanite woman confronts Jesus. Her daughter is possessed by an evil demon, and the Canaanite Woman asks Jesus to heal her. She begs Jesus for help, and he responds with silence. So, she persists. She follows Jesus, shouting at him, pestering him until the disciples urge Jesus to send her away. Attempting to be rid of her, Jesus tells the woman that she and her daughter are not his concern. He has come for the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and she is not one of them.

But the Canaanite woman is relentless, taking the insult, flipping the script, and telling the Messiah of Israel that she will settle for his cast-offs, his leftovers, and the crumbs that fall from his table. She practically dares Jesus to refuse her! And he cannot.