

“If Martin Were Still With Us”

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Umstead Park United Church of Christ

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. (NRSV)

So Jesus rejected this woman because she wasn't like him... at least that's how this passage starts. She was a foreigner. She didn't look like him. Which is to say, **even Jesus** had some growing to do. I'll leave that point for now by saying we **all** probably have some growing to do.

OK ... let's talk about last Sunday morning:

Man, that was awkward.

Some of you weren't here and without taking up too much time today let me offer a brief summary so you can better understand the content to follow.

Last Sunday we were all quite excited to have a local celebrity with us. She co-teaches a course on race relations with an acclaimed author in Durham. She has performed on Hollywood soundtracks, been a guest on Dick Gordon's "The Story." She has sung numerous times at Moral Monday events and her voice and witness as Gospel Singer and teacher is astounding. We publicized her time with us with great anticipation.

And so when I began worship last Sunday and there were a large number of empty seats I thought to myself... Where IS everyone?

Shortly into the speaker's address, when she brought greetings from her church, a fact prior to that unknown to me... a church here in Raleigh that has led some very ugly protests against the LGBT community... when she mentioned that, alarm bells went off in my head and I said to myself... Thank **GOD** there are several people who aren't here!!

Alas, though... some of you, and others, *were* here.

And we fell out of our chairs in disbelief when the speaker lumped the LGBT community in her list of the evils of the world ... other evils like ISIS.

Suffice it to say that almost no one heard anything after that. (I asked one of you this week what you made of the applause given the speaker at the end of her sermon and you replied, "What applause?" I asked someone else and they summarized... "It was unenthusiastic politeness.")

In my seat, while she was still preaching, I wasn't hearing anything either. I was pretty occupied trying to figure out how and when to address the speaker somehow while we were still in the worship (Personally, I was shooting for the announcement time when I was going to plug her forum that followed... I was planning on something like... "At the Forum when our guest speaks and sings there will also be time for discussion and, quite frankly, I think we've got some things we want to discuss with her!")

But well before we got to that point, some of you began praying, offering concerns and celebrations... Scott Andrews offered thanks that this was a community for all persons no matter their gender, or gender expression or sexuality or orientation or whoever they were they were welcome here!" (or something along those lines)

And Judi Culver, trembling with visible rage, seconded Scott's prayer and prayed for the time when all those who have so unjustly been oppressed in the past could embrace those who are unjustly oppressed in the present. (or something like that.)

And our speaker heard those prayers. She heard more in the time immediately following church (Thank you, Hope.) and she heard even more in the forum that followed. By the time she left the building, she may have thought she heard it all.... But in truth she has heard more this week and I fully plan to share a link to the recording of today's worship.

Importantly, let me say this, to my knowledge, everything said to our guest, everything I saw witnessed or spoke myself was said with respect and appropriateness.

Given the steam coming out of some of your ears, that in itself was a miracle.

No shots were fired. (I told one person this was just another reason bringing guns to church would be a bad idea.)

No shouting matches ensued.

We were so polite some of you were mad at your selves for BEING polite.

When the speaker uttered her infamous litany, the evils of the world ... our hearts sank.

Many of you considered walking out at that point. One of you did. ...and several of you have told me this week what you wished you had done and WILL do, you assure me, if anything like this ever happens again.

Others of you, a small number, but a few of you wondered why, given our crystal clear embrace of the LGBT community ... why we can't listen to someone more painlessly even when we do not agree.

Well, on one level I get that and I certainly want us to be able to entertain differences ... that is, when they do not threaten the well-being of any of us.

People... our well-being, some more than others, were at stake.

I heard many messages this week but ones like this, and there were multiple like it, it was messages like this caused me the most pain:

Doug,

I wanted to touch base with you regarding Sunday's guest speaker. I left feeling numb and not understanding what had just happened. I drove down Brownleigh Dr. and tears came to my eyes. I reflected the first time you and I met ... to discuss being a member of

UPUCC. I expressed [what] had prevented me from being in church for so many years. Those feelings that I left behind some years ago from a church that made me feel dirty and ashamed re-emerged with a vengeance [this past Sunday morning] with JUST ONE WORD. It wasn't just the word...it was how she said it. It is one of those things that only LGBT people can explain. That feeling that we are not worthy of God's supposed abundant love. My heart hurts most because I remember being in a church knowing I had this secret that I wanted to go away. I could tell no one because I was ashamed and already felt god hated me. I don't want anyone especially a child to feel that pain. You Never Forget.

I am hopeful that we learned a huge lesson with her stepping before our UPUCC family. This was a wake-up call to me. It helped me recognize that there is so much work to do for the Black LGBT community. I have quite a few african american male friends that are gay. Some are [closeted] and cannot free themselves from their church family. I have learned so much from them.

I pray that all those affected Sunday will somehow use this in a positive way to grow.

I want to thank this person, and all of you really, who responded with such compassion and grace. This week I was reminded of what an extraordinary honor it is to walk with you.

By having such difficulty with our guest's message are we saying that we want to walk lockstep in opinion and even theology, though? Are we implying that we can only invite persons who agree with us in every way?

No! No, differences of opinion and theology are fine... BUT...

But there is a line of safety that cannot be crossed without great consequences...

And to inflict spiritual, emotional and psychological abuse crosses that line. End of story.

One of the many conversations that has been going in this week, one of the threads from our guest's visit, has been in answer to this question:

Did she know her audience in advance? Did she know what we stand for, who we stand with... Hell, who we are!

I didn't think so at the time, but I've come to learn that when she was invited to lead the forum she was explicitly told ... and I quote from the invitation...

“...our church is very diverse regarding sexual orientation and identity...”

So did the guest speaker know who we are? Apparently so.

How then are we to understand what she spoke on Sunday?

I think she is a good person, but I also think she has unconsciously swallowed a cultish religious worldview that maintains men as superior to women, and straight as the only way of God. I think she is so comfortable that she is right in her theology that she is oblivious to the human carnage it causes in its wake.

...which is to say, as much as this woman sings powerfully about freedom, she is still not free. She is bound by a church that oppresses her ...and she does not even realize this.

There has been a lot of second-guessing about how people feel they should have reacted last Sunday. The more pertinent question for us is ... How will we act now?

Only with honesty grounded in love will we make a real difference in such matters.

Marcia Welsh reminded me of a quote that a dear friend of mine used to regularly recite:

It's a famous verse from Edward Markham

“He drew a circle that shut me out-

Let me re-phrase it this way:

SHE drew a circle that shut us out

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But love and I had the wit to win:

We drew a circle and took [her] in!”

Somehow, someway, I want to muster up enough spirit to reply to last week's speaker with honesty grounded in love.

I'm only including a small portion of the issues and lessons learned that some of you shared with me and your reactions were and are quite varied. And I actually don't think it's fair or even healthy that I'm the only one who gets to talk so much about the reactions. We need to hear from each other... and so, next Sunday morning in the 9:30 forum time before worship, you are all invited to listen to each other. You can talk, but mostly ***we all need to listen!***

We need to hear each other's pain and perspective... again, in honesty... with love.

We even need to hear from the one person I'm aware of who, upon hearing last week's speaker careen into her list of evils, the one person among who picked up her belongings and walked out... That is why I've invited Michelle Ellis to preach next Sunday!

About 30 of you stayed last week after worship for the forum that our guest led as well.

I don't remember everything I said to her near the close of that time, but I do remember I told her I planned to preach the coming Sunday, today, on 'If Martin Were Still with Us' "...and one thing I am convinced of," I said to her directly, "is that MLK would now stand with the LGBT community." He would have evolved in his position in the same way that many of us have evolved, in the same way that his wife, Coretta Scott King, and William Barber and Jeremiah Wright and Barack Obama and many other great leaders in the black and white community have evolved on issues of inclusion.

Said King so famously in his Letter from the Birmingham Jail:

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

...which is to say, our true freedom is bound up in the freedom of each other.

Which leads us back to the scripture today... even Jesus evolved in his understanding of who God's embrace includes. Hint, hint... it's everyone!

In Matthew's version of the story Jesus first ignores the woman and when she continues to plead the disciples come up to him and say... "Jesus, do something to shut this woman up."

Instead of exhorting Jesus to show mercy, they want him to remove an irritant!

This is a fascinating passage that we could discuss for quite a while but here's the condensed point for today... *Jesus did eventually come around*. The principals of love were there... but on this day, Jesus eyes were opened more and the boundaries of the circle was widened. Jesus learned something.

There is a story told about Gandhi... I don't remember the specifics but he made a pronouncement about a particular public policy declaring that he believed something... and then a few days later he reversed his position. A western reporter confronted him in public. "Mr. Gandhi, last week you said one thing and now, this week you are saying just the opposite. In our culture we call that hypocrisy." Replied Gandhi, "Ah, in our culture we say I have learned something."

Jesus learned something.... And I love him all the more for it.

Last Sunday night (last Sunday was a busy day) I was fortunate enough to hear another great black voice, Rupert Nacoste. Nacoste is a professor of psychology at NC State. He has recently published this book entitled "Taking on Diversity: How Can we Move From Anxiety to Respect?"

... and in his speech and his book Nacoste talks not about diversity, not about black and white, but about neo-diversity... the culture we are and are growing more into... black and white and gay and straight and Christian and Muslim and physically able and physically challenged and male and female and transgendered and unisex and mentally able and mentally challenged and American and African and European and Asian and middle eastern and... well *that* is neo-diversity.

... and what is more important than ever, says Nacoste, is for us to learn to respect our culture's neo-diversity.

I think we're farther down that road than our speaker last week... but I suspect we have a ways to go ourselves.

Nacoste concluded the session last Sunday with the powerful words of Martin Luther King, Jr. I think they are more than appropriate for us today:

"The greatest tragedy of this age will not be the vitriolic words and deeds of the children of darkness, but the appalling silence of the children of light."

Speak up Children... with honesty and in love.

Amen.