

Many years ago there was a popular book, based on a love story that I never read, that resulted in a movie I never saw, that included a memorable sentence that caused me to wince the first time I heard it and every time I've thought about it since. Do you remember the sentence? Can anybody call it out? That's it: "loving is never having to say you're sorry."

Now, I confess that I probably misunderstood the intent, but Baloney, I thought the first time I heard it, Baloney! Maybe I'm odd, but my experience has been just the opposite.

Were you ever hurt by the actions or attitudes of someone you admired and held in highest esteem? Did you ever find yourself embarrassed or shocked by something someone close to your heart said or did? Have you ever noticed that the biggest problem with putting yourself or another up on a pedestal is that pedestals are precarious?

That's a common human dilemma, I suppose. Some nights when I lay down and review the things I've said and done and thought about and give my day to God so I can get some sleep, I find myself full of regrets and needing to seek forgiveness. And I don't think I'm alone in those feelings, but that's the subject of another sermon—something about your personal foibles and mine. Something about how we need to forgive one another and ourselves for being human. Something about loving one another that leads us to greater sensitivity. Something about how that's what Jesus wants us to do and how its the only healthy way to live and that we shrivel up and die of pettiness if we don't manage to do it—but that's another sermon for another day.

Today I have something else in mind. I want to stretch that idea of getting along with one another and with our selves past the boundary of me and mine and here and now into a bigger idea way beyond the personal.

Here's my idea for today: if the nations and the people of this earth are ever going to get together and seriously face the problems which threaten to undo us and overwhelm everything that is good and just and beautiful in this thing we call humanity, that includes our physical environment and the intricate web of connectivity that we are part of, then people of good conscience and religious faith had better find a way to get together and discover some common ground and begin act as if the future matters.

It is enough that life on this tiny planet brings us things like tsunamis and hurricanes and plagues of locust and famines. It is enough that accidents happen and diseases attack. All of that is enough.

To say it simply, we have a sufficiency of pain and problems, but when you pile on top of those unavoidable points of pain the things we might be able to avoid, things like war, and duplicity in government, and policies that rely on fantasy and fear more than science and integrity and add in the injustices that create pollution and encourage terrorists driving cars into crowds and blowing themselves up, it is not only more than enough, it is frightening and depressing. It's been a tough week!

And I have to tell you this sermon began as I reflected on our Gospel lesson for today and with my embarrassment about few things that Jesus had to say. I put Jesus on a mighty high pedestal and our text for today is that troubling little event of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman. Were you listening? The woman is hurting. Her daughter is suffering. She throws herself on the ground before Jesus and pleads for help.

And the one we call savior, the one in whose honor this building is built, the one in whose name we gather today, turns her away and in effect calls her a dog—a common insult in the Middle-East and in cultures around the world. He tells her that his mission in life is narrow and well defined. In effect, he tells her that he is only about the business of helping those who look like him and who happen to share the religion of his birth and his particular point of view. He appears to tell her that foreigners need not apply and needn't bother knocking on the door of that pathetic and vengeful deity revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai for the sole benefit of the Hebrew nation.

And here I see in the Jesus I love, the mirror image of the nasty person people who love me have sometimes seen in me at my worst moments. And I am shocked and I am offended and I want to scream at Jesus: "Jesus, what a dumb thing to say!" You've got God way too small! You're giving God a bad name and limiting your love way too much the same way I do it sometimes when my anger or my fear or my politics get in the way. Did you every catch yourself majoring in the minors when it comes to loving?

And then I thought about how this happens in the religious community. I thought about religious leaders from many traditions who think their way of believing makes them right and others wrong, or who figure that they understand Jesus or Mohammad or the Buddha, so fully that they can condemn others or fence the freedom of the individual conscience or who try to turn their views on human sexuality into laws which bind the rest of us to their view of reality.

I find myself wanting to get really wound up about those religious folk who want to lead us back to the dark ages on virtually every issue, masking their ignorance and fear and male control issues behind innocuous sounding slogans like intelligent design or family values, or sanctity of life; seeking to bring back the good old days of back alley abortions and transform this nation or other nations into self-righteous,

freedom-denying holy empires where they are in charge and where anyone who disagrees with them is going to hell.

Hate and intolerance is a poor platform upon which to build the future, unless the future we want is one of war and human misery.

And there it is: in this little story, Jesus calls the Canaanite woman a dog. And in this one passage, the human side of Jesus, the time-bound part of the man Jesus, the Jesus who was born in the first century, the part of Jesus who believed that the world was flat and that disease was caused by demons is revealed. But the Canaanite woman persists, and she pleads, and she pushes and by the power of God, her daughter is healed.

And in my mind, this little healing is a sign of the in-breaking of the Holy. God in this passage is not in Jesus where you and I might expect her to be. God in this passage is the woman—the foreign woman, the other, the one who ambushes the earthly Jesus with the power of Amazing Grace. In her, I believe we catch a glimpse of the eternal Christ, the one whose love is boundless and whose grace is transformative. Here we see a tiny sign that the violence and stupidity that separates people by gender and tribe and race and class is not the final word.

Here it is revealed in a way most simple that any religion or political system that blesses violence and feeds on fear is a human creation, a human invention that will not stand up to the power of caring love wherever that love finds a home.

Like all of you I am appalled by terrorism. Like all of you, I am shocked that in the name of religion, radicals can find the courage to drive cars into people or pick up guns or blow up subway trains or burn crosses or commit hate crimes or destroy abortion clinics.

But believe me when I say it, bad religion, tying your hopes to an image of a God too small and too time bound or too based on an ancient book—whether that book is the Bible or the Quran is the foundation for much of the sorry misery that besets this world of ours. Bad theology causes bad behavior; rotten religion props up the thought world of al-Qaeda cells just as much as it does the Klan. It motivates the sort of anti-abortion fanatic who killed Dr. Edward Tiller in Wichita, Kansas a few years ago. All of them are siblings operating under the same delusional faith system—that skims the polluted surface of the same stagnate pond.

And as I see it, the way forward is a different way. Not so much in a political sense, because as far as I'm concerned, the political realities and politicians of this world will find a way to catch up with the movement of the human spirit.

I believe that each time people of good will develop new ways of looking at the world through the eyes of faith—the politicians will find a way to follow. I believe that democracy was a faith idea, a philosophy, a religious idea, a way of believing, centuries before the first free election was ever held.

What we need is a new way where the followers of Jesus and the followers of Mohammed and the followers of Moses and the followers of the great Hindu and Buddhist sages and all of the rest of those amazing points of positive energy in the history of humanity begin to discover that what all of them are saying is the common nudging of a single Divine Spirit toward a way of light and truth and hope and love and mutual respect.

Bishop John Spong, who spent time with our congregation in Florida, wrote some time ago that too many of our leaders are engaged in “an assault on both intelligence and learning. They deny global warming, they oppose stem cell research, they are closed-minded about end of life issues, they express uninformed negativity about homosexual persons and they attempt to blur the line between church and state.” (Spong, “A New Dark Age Begins”) Now, those are big words and big ideas, but let me suggest a few simple things you and I can do.

Ask yourself this question: Who, in your life, qualifies as being less than human? I hate to insult the animals we love by using the word ‘dog’, but like the Jesus who wandered this earth back in the first century, every one of us, including yours truly, is a prisoner of our own time and our own prejudices. I have my dog list and so do you and so did the earthly Jesus, but the amazing thing about Jesus was that Jesus was open to the divine.

The power of God moved through that Canaanite woman to save Jesus. She reached out to Jesus in her pain pushing him to abandon his first century Palestinian Jewish mind-set and heal her daughter from the demons who tormented her that day.

And here’s the thing: You and I carry that same spark of the divine. Like the Canaanite woman, we are the children of God’s love: fully and wonderfully created to transcend our time bound nature and reach for the stars.

Love someone, find a way to care, speak up when and where you can. Search for the deepest truth God might reveal to your heart and then live it. Find common ground with other people of good will. Pray for guidance. Invest in the future. Plant a tree whose shade you will not live to enjoy. Open your mind. Forgive. And above every other thing, love your neighbor and do all that it is in your power to do to expand the circle of just who you believe your neighbor to be. Amen.