

“Thank a Teacher”

Matthew 15:21-28

August 4, 2019

Several years ago, religion columnist Paul Vitello authored a piece that clearly struck a chord with a number of my colleagues around the country. I know this because by the end of the day the article was posted on the pages of fifty Facebook friends. All of these friends had one important characteristic in common with one another and with me. Every one of us had graduated from seminary in the last ten years and each was serving in a pastoral leadership position. The title of the article was, “Taking A Break from the Lord’s Work” and the first paragraph told the story, “The findings have surfaced with ominous regularity over the last few years, and with little notice: Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension, and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade, their use of antidepressants has risen, while their life expectancy has fallen. Many would change jobs if they could.”

Now, I do not mention this recent article in an attempt to garner sympathy, raise suspicion, or cause concern. I don’t mention it to provoke fear from our new Lake Fellows as they prepare to join us later this month. Thanks to the extraordinary work of the Lilly Endowment and its National Clergy Renewal Program, there is a growing awareness of the burden on pastors and resources to manage it in healthy ways. My intention this morning is to suggest that the conclusions of these studies are consequential for all of us. The increasing stress, workaholism, blurred boundaries, and weighty expectations that plague members of the clergy have their roots in the same conditions that face all of us. If you are a student, a teacher, or a parent, you feel those conditions heavy you in these early August weeks. Even as the warm temperatures and plans of many continue to tell of summer relaxation, you are entering a new round of preparation and anticipatory anxiety. The rest of us are just behind you.

I’m concerned that we have established a new norm without intending to do so. The drive toward greater and more efficient productivity. The ubiquity of availability by phone, text, email, and social media. The relentless onslaught of information and the never-ending news

cycle. Financial pressures that seem to find unique expression at each stage of life. The effects are palpable. A prevailing ethos of irritability, frustration, even anger. Acts of road rage, random violence, even out-of-control parents at children’s sporting events. Decreased emphasis on physical, spiritual, and emotional wellbeing. Increasing disregard for other people—their needs, their perspective, their friendship, their value. The stress-drenched culture that we inhabit both enables and compels us to guard our interests, seek self-advancement, ignore the limits of our humanity and our dependence on others for meaning. The piece I referenced is not without hope, however. It does suggest a cure, or at least a temporary remedy, for this mounting pressure. It’s fairly simple. Take a little time off. Do something that relaxes your mind and refreshes your soul. And, perhaps most importantly, acknowledge and honor your humanity, your limits, and your dependence on others.

If this final recommendation seems most challenging to you, then you are in good company. This morning, we find Jesus himself struggling with the demands and requirements of his vocation. The context of the story is helpful. By this point of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus has gained a large and cumbersome following. In the previous chapter, he tries to take a break by taking a boat to a deserted place, but his plans are immediately compromised by a great crowd. No Sabbath rest. No vacation. Instead, Jesus hosts dinner for five thousand that night. The very next day, Jesus goes up on a mountain to pray. There Matthew tells us he is blessedly all alone. For a moment—a single verse. Just as he is catching his breath, a terrible storm comes up and his trusty disciples find themselves on a boat in the middle of the raging sea. So Jesus packs up his picnic basket and fishing pole and heads back down the mountain, walks across the water, and calms the storm. An extreme example of vacation time cut short by a crisis at work.

All of this stands as background. Jesus is on the road—a long way from Galilee, a Gentile city in the north where none of his own people would know to look for him. But even there, he is recognized. A Canaanite woman begins

to shout in his direction. “Have mercy on me, Lord! My daughter is tormented by a demon.” For Matthew, this is code for serious mental illness. We don’t know the details but we know enough. The woman is desperate. Her daughter is suffering and for some reason she believes, she trusts, that Jesus can do something about it.

Jesus is silent while his disciples do what they always do—try to send the loud, obtrusive, needy person away. But this time Jesus is not moved with compassion and he does not respond as we would expect or hope. First, he draws a line of exclusion—I was only sent to Israel’s lost sheep. And then, when pressed, he compares Gentiles, like this woman and her suffering daughter, to dogs. That is, somehow unworthy or unwelcome.

If you and I were to write the script, it would go differently. This story doesn’t make it into our children’s Bibles (I checked), and it’s not hard to understand why. It’s difficult, even painful, to hear Jesus speak in this way. That’s why some scholars have gone to great lengths to attempt to explain these words away. I tried some of those paths as I prepared this sermon, but I kept coming up empty. I simply can’t escape the clarity, the plain text, of this story. Nor can I escape the mirror that it holds up to my own humanity.

One of the core convictions of the Christian faith is the belief that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. I confess that I do not fully understand this, but I do trust it to be true. And, if it is true, then we must allow Jesus to have human moments no matter how uncomfortable they make us. If it is true, then we have a savior who can identify with our weakness and our struggle. If it is true, then there are moments when even the teacher needs to be taught.

And so the Canaanite woman, a foreigner and enemy of the Jews with no social standing or power, is the recipient of some of the harshest words Jesus ever uttered. In response to her direct request for help, Jesus brushes the woman aside with a bitter metaphor that is both dismissive and offensive. You are not my concern. This is not my job. Talk about clergy burnout.

The woman could have given up. She could have taken her precious daughter away. She might have lost faith and, red with embarrassment, walked the long road home in defeat. But this desperate, faithful woman is not finished yet. She has one more opportunity to speak as Jesus walks away, and she does not waste it. Having been called a dog, the woman

accepts the label but not the verdict. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ tables.”

I imagine a silent pause after these words. Hushed expectation from the crowd. Rolling eyes from the disciples. But, for Jesus, it is as if the key turns in the lock. He acknowledges the woman for the first time. I picture him wide-eyed: “Great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish.” And so it is.

The fiery words of Jesus here, as off-putting as they may be, provide an opening for the woman’s bold response, which proves transformative in the encounter. Jesus’ emotional outburst permits an honest rejoinder from the Gentile woman. It may be, as many suggest, that the woman called Jesus back to the practice of his ministry, but I’m not so sure he ever left it behind. Despite the high gloss shine with which Jesus is often painted, his humanity did not diminish his ability to proclaim and embody God’s kingdom. His humanity enabled his ministry.

So does ours. This lesson can be particularly hard for the overworked among us to learn and appreciate. This morning, as we prepare to head back to school, I’m thinking especially about all those who serve the educational, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual needs of children. In our appreciation of teachers and administrators and counselors and coaches and facility staff and bus drivers and cafeteria workers....and all others who go about their work with what appears to be tireless energy and passion... we can forget to acknowledge the limitations imposed by the burden of being human.

Maybe you can identify. Easily overtaken by the urgency of other people’s needs, we can be indifferent to our own, or to those of the ones closest to us. Too often, I trick myself into believing that this is admirable sacrificial service on behalf of the ministry I have been called to pursue. It is not. Instead, it creates unhealthy dependence and unrealistic expectations. This became abundantly clear to me when a good friend in a previous congregation confronted me with this assessment, “when I see you working all the time, I become convinced that I’m supposed to do the same thing.” Whether we embrace it or deny it, for those of us in leadership and teaching roles, our lives are models to others for what it means to practice the faith. In acknowledging human limitations, we grant permission for others to do the same. In displaying the full human range of emotions and responses, we invite others to more authentic living.

Jesus' words to the Canaanite woman may not represent exemplary pastoral care or teaching practice. But they do perfectly represent his state of mind and emotion in that moment. They are deeply personal words of frustration and need, and they open a door to sincere dialogue with a fellow human being in need.

I remember, as an undergraduate at Duke, sneaking into the back door of Stanley Hauerwas' Christian Ethics class at the Divinity School. That day, Professor Hauerwas told the class that the foundational ethical obligations of a Christian could be comprehensively summarized by the simple command to tell the truth. I believe this, and yet so often I misrepresent myself as a tireless and indefatigable servant of God who is always overflowing with energy and Christian charity. What I am is a flawed and fatigued fellow traveler. This is the truth, and it is also the starting point for genuine transformation.

This story does not end with the harsh words of Jesus or the desperate reply of the woman. Her daughter is healed. But first Jesus speaks to the Canaanite woman, "Great is your faith!" The greatness of the woman's faith is demonstrated in her persistence and in her courage. If you have been in her sandals, then you know what it is to cry out to God in desperation from the end of your rope. You know what it is to fall to your knees in prayer. You know what it is to be completely out of options, to be entirely dependent on God, to be content with the crumbs of grace. And perhaps you have found that when you reach that point, your prayers take on a new courage and a deeper faith. In such moments, I believe that our words and our unspoken pleas are heard, just as the Canaanite woman's desperate request was granted.

"Great is your faith," Jesus says. The woman believed enough to press on; she was distraught enough to challenge the one she called Lord. And so she taught the teacher a truth, something he knew but needed to hear again. Teachers come in all shapes and sizes and lessons are taught with words and actions. So, take some time this week to thank someone who has taught you, whether that lesson came in facts and figures, or in the willingness to be fully vulnerable in your presence. Thank a teacher whose genuine humanity has instructed you in the art of living. And then remember that you too are called to teach...sometimes by simply being who you are. It's enough. Amen.