

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today's gospel reading is a tough one. We heard that Jesus was in a foreign land with his disciples when a foreign woman interrupted. Now, the rest of the interaction baffles most scholars. Ok, maybe it doesn't baffle as much as the interpretation diverge.

One camp of interpreters is that Jesus was testing the woman. He refused her request to see if she will be persistent, to test if she would be patient, and to see if she was humble. Essentially, Jesus was determining if she really believes and trusts in his ability to heal her daughter. // Yet, some scholars take issue with this interpretation because it can be used to justify a belief that God tests us. It communicates the idea that God withholds grace and healing until we do something. It's a "pick yourself up by your own bootstraps" kind of faith that is at odds with how God reveals Godself throughout the Bible, and for us Lutherans, it's wholly against our interpretive lens.

Now, this other main camp says that this woman was pushing back on Jesus to teach Jesus about how God works in the world. You see, these scholars note that when Jesus said, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” that he was using a common place racial and ethnic slur against the woman. In response to this slur, the woman taught Jesus about God’s vision for all to be included and not just Jewish born. They point to the arch of Matthew’s gospel and that this story is a turning point after which Jesus began to live out this inclusive message more fully. Some of these scholars say that this shows that Jesus is full humanity and that Jesus’ perfection is found in his ability to realize wrongdoing and work to change his thoughts and actions. Depending on your Christology, or how you see Jesus, you can imagine that some feel uncomfortable with this view because it assumes that Jesus needed a human to teach him and that Jesus would use a racial slur.

There’s a third path here. This one acknowledges the ambiguity of the exchange and the potential downfalls of the other interpretations, but it asserts that the focus of the story is that Jesus was invited to accelerate God’s mission in the world. It’s not teaching him to do it, but it’s call him to hurry up with

Now, whether you fall in camp one, two, or three, I'm not sure that it matters. It's important, but I'm not sure that the essence of the story depends on the specifics. At its core, the interaction is asking the question, "Who is God's mission for?" Who is it for?

This is an important question not only for our faith, but also for our life together. After all, Jesus taught us that faith cannot be separated from the community. With that in mind, I think about how the same question asked in today's gospel reading is asked in our civic life. You see, the question, "who is it for?" is at the crux of politics. Remember, the essence of politics revolves around who has power and how resources are distributed. And, we see political parties answering this central question differently. They ask: Is our country for native-born individuals or for all? Is our country for straight people or queer people? Is our country for women or men? And these types of questions go on.

As Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton notes, when Lutherans first came to the United States, they weren't considered Americans because they didn't speak English or fit in with the Deist, Calvinist religious majority. Irish, Italians, and Poles were often seen as outsiders. Catholics and Jews were considered a threat.¹

Enslaved people were 3/5ths of a person. Native peoples were excluded, sovereign nations were relocated, and children were stolen to be placed in boarding schools that forced children to assimilate under fear of violence, abuse, or even death. And the reality is, that this trauma was inflicted by religious institutions and organizations at alarming rates. You see, the question "who is this for?" is a question that permeates our life, the lives of our founders, and indeed the life of Jesus.

¹ <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2023/06/who-is-a-real-american/>

It's to this very question that the Scriptures make clear that God's mission is for all. Today's gospel reading was a turning point for Jesus in Matthew's gospel. Here, Jesus began to teach and preach that God's reign, or God's vision, is that all are included, no matter their racial, religious, ethnic, or familial background. Yet, this was not the beginning of God's inclusion. Indeed, the prophet Isaiah in today's first reading made clear that God's house is a house for "all peoples." And this theme continues in countless other places from the Psalms to Paul's letters and beyond. You see, throughout the Scriptures, from generation to generation, God is making clear that there is a singular answer to the question "Who is it for?" And that answer is "everyone." God's banquet table is spread for all. God's healing is for all. God's love is for all.

And the thing about today's gospel reading is that it's not a nice sermon that Jesus gave. Rather, God's vision goes beyond words. God's vision was embodied in flesh, for that woman's daughter was healed instantly and the woman was made whole. The woman who the disciples had urged Jesus to silence, she was validated, she taught a lesson of love, and she was welcomed into a community in a way not seen before.

And our God invites us to do the same. Not out of fear or obligation, but out of freedom and love. For God is on a multi-generational mission to continually remind us that we are included and invited to that work. It's with that in mind that the ELCA Advocacy Office is helping us to name where we have fallen short and has offered us an opportunity to put our bodies to work. In your bulletin or using the link/QR code on your screen you'll see an insert about that. So too, as we show up at this table to be fed by God's grace, we embody God's mission. As we live out our Reconciling in Christ statement to welcome everyone of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and racial/ethnic backgrounds we partner in God's mission.

Well, that's it. Today's gospel gets us thinking about an age-old question, "who is this for?" Who is this country for? Who is the earth that we share for? Who is all of this for? Today's readings make the answer crystal clear. God sees that all of this is for everyone. God's vision is vast. God's mission is massive. And we, we have the opportunity to be a part of this movement. We are invited to join in God's work, knowing that in it, we will find love, grace, and healing abound. Amen.