

It's Time to Step Outside
Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church
Sunday August 16, 2020
Matthew 15: 21–28
By Susanna Singer

I have always seen the world in terms of “insiders” and “outsiders,” and the place I have wanted to be is “inside.”

I moved from the city to the suburbs and changing schools at the age of eight, which put me outside the established “best friend” relationships among the girls in my class.

Being the shy kid, the socially awkward kid, the kid who loved learning, didn't help either.

And even when I had made it safely into the academic world, I was acutely aware that I was still an “outsider:” a working class woman who didn't have the confidence that those from more “upper class” families seemed to have automatically.

It's hard to visit those memories, because of the emotions they bring up: the sense of inadequacy, the fear of risk, the sting of exclusion, but I need to look at them clearly and assess them honestly.

Because actually, I had so much, even then, that made me an “insider” automatically: intelligence, opportunity, health, academic capacity, and above all, white skin.

What complicated my own insider/outsider status was that peculiarly British intersection of social class and gender, not race.

Just as complicated has been my dawning awareness, later in life, that those institutions I got “inside” as comfortably as I could, have been in the business of exclusion for a long time.

My school; my church; my seminary – all setting up and policing strong boundaries, boundaries that I can kinda-sorta see, because I have bumped into them in small ways myself in relation to social class and gender.

But they are the boundaries of institutions that are above all white institutions, and I've been able to be an “insider” there in ways that would have been impossible if I had been Black.

All of which brings me to the complicated good news in today's Gospel story.

Here is our heroine, the ultimate outsider, a member of an ethnic group who are hated historical enemies of the Jewish people, a woman alone, a mother with a sick daughter.

She is yelling and screaming for help from Jesus, because that is the pitch of her despair.

She makes no apology, she doesn't worry about whether or not she and her daughter deserve help – she simply shouts, loudly and persistently.

And this Canaanite woman, this foreigner who is not a Jew, nevertheless calls on Jesus as “Lord, Son of David.”

She names him as God's Jewish Messiah; she uses the words of a faith that is not her own to make her claim on Jesus; she appeals to him as if she is appealing to God.

When Jesus first ignores her, and then insults her, she pushes back.

She beats him at his own rhetorical game, she turns his insult back on him, she doesn't flinch at personal humiliation if only she can get the help she needs for her child.

And Jesus is persuaded by this feisty and intelligent woman, he acknowledges the power of her argument and her faith, he expands his horizons and steps outside his comfort zone.

His ministry is enlarged because of his willingness to encounter her.

I'll say that again so that we can really take it in, because it is so important: The ministry of Jesus is enlarged because he is willing to change when he is challenged by an outsider.

I believe that is as great a miracle, as much a part of the good news of this story, as the healing of the woman's daughter.

Matthew's version of this story is much harsher than the version we find in Mark's Gospel, because Matthew was writing for an insider community of Jewish Christians, Jewish like Jesus.

This new Christian community was suspicious of outsiders and not at all sure whether they could (or would) make room for Gentile Christians.

I think that the shocking and difficult aspects in Matthew's telling of this story are there on purpose, in order to challenge Matthew's community of faith.

So this is a story with two kinds of good news: when we are outsiders God offers us the promise of being heard, and the encouragement to keep on shouting; and when we are insiders God challenges us to get outside our preconceptions, our fears, and our privilege, and change our ways.

I've been teaching this summer about the colonial and post-colonial history of the Episcopal Church, and it's not a pretty picture – it wasn't back then in the eighteenth and nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and it still isn't today.

When we look at our church's history through the lens of this story, what do we see?

We see a very white, very male, very wealthy, very segregated church, in which the representation of people of color has always been and still is staggeringly small.

I had never realized, for example, that all those lovely Episcopal schools that grace the South and East, in particular, were founded right after *Brown vs. The Board of Education*, so that white families fleeing to the suburbs could access all-white schools under the auspices of their church.

Even during this week when we remember the witness of Jonathan Daniels, a white martyr for the cause of voting rights, we must also remember that there were those in our own church who were firmly opposed to those who marched, like Jonathan, from Selma to Montgomery.

When we look at our church's choices through the lens of this story, what do we see?

We see ordination processes, ministry priorities, hiring practices, and leadership decisions, all shaped by our assumptions about race.

For example, after the first Black Bishops were consecrated – James Holly (in Haiti) in 1874, and Samuel Ferguson (in Liberia) in 1885 (ten and twenty years after Emancipation) – we waited more than 30 more years for the next, Edward Thomas Denby, and he was designated as an assistant bishop “for colored work only.”

The first Black diocesan bishop (not an assistant) in the continental USA (not in Central America or Liberia) was John Melville Burgess in ... wait for it ... 1962, and the second and third were consecrated in 1988.

With a record like that, we can see that there are plenty of people our church has treated as “dogs,” who have found no food at our table, who have been belittled and excluded.

So when, as a church, we find ourselves in the same “insider” place as Matthew's church, with a history of unwillingness to open our hearts and our doors to people we see as outsiders, then this story brings good news in the form of a challenge.

Because if this is our history, Jesus himself is the model for the change we need to embrace.

Once Jesus' mind is changed there are no half-measures – the woman is warmly commended, her daughter is healed “instantly,” and immediately afterwards, Jesus goes on to perform the second of his great feeding miracles – except this time it is the Gentiles who are fed.

When we look at our church's current efforts through the lens of this story, what do we see?

We see small signs of hope: we see enlarged ministries with communities of color, we see deliberate choices for more diverse leadership, we see efforts to open our eyes to the history from which we've insulated ourselves, we see truth-telling and listening and the beginnings of repentance.

The Canaanite woman is forcing us to ask ourselves as a church: will we be humble enough, open enough to let go of privilege, so we can listen to others when they challenge our treatment of them as “outsiders”?

Will we be like Jesus, and respect them, and go outside to stand with them?

There are people of color all around us who are crying out in the face of racial injustice.

We can respond as a church, we can go outside join forces with those we have treated as outsiders for too long, so that together we can change the unjust systems within which we are all embedded.

God will give us the power to do that.

In this story of a very human Jesus, with a complex human identity, encountering an outsider, and willing to expand and change his mind so that grace and mercy can be extended, I see God's fingerprints so clearly.

Because this is the way that God always works: God is not proud; God is not remote; God is not uncaring.

God is above all God-with-us: active in creation, all mixed up in our checkered history, incarnate among us in Jesus Christ, supporting the outsiders, cracking open the doors of the insiders, challenging the church constantly to confront its institutional sin, challenging God's people to show the world new ways of living.

In Jesus, God is willing to become the ultimate outsider, to be thrown out of the city, thrown into a shameful death – and to overcome all those things so that they no longer overcome us.

Matthew tells this painful story to challenge his community, and our own, to let go of our “insider” privilege and open our hearts to God's broader vision of inclusion for all people.

God will work in and through all of the messiness and suffering and sinfulness of our ordinary human life – God will even work through our imperfect church – if we are willing to be changed as Jesus was changed.

If we are willing to step outside our zone of comfort and safety and stand with the ones whom we have previously excluded, we will find that God is already there, standing with and supporting us all as we keep on shouting.

I think it's time to step outside.