

John Sampson
“The Unmoveable Moved”
Text: Matthew 15:21 - 28
Preached at KVCC
August 20, 2017

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer. AMEN.

As I thought about the readings we’ve considered in worship over the past couple of weeks it occurred to me that we really have been schooled.

We’ve been schooled in a kind of physics.

Certainly not a Newtonian physics.

Rather, a physics of miracles.

What's a miracle?

Who gets to perform a miracle?

What is the most basic thing you need to make a miracle successful?

Is there such a thing as a half-miracle?

These are all questions we've considered.

And today we continue our schooling. Today, we learn how to miraculously move the immovable.

In just a couple of chapters, the authors of Matthew will relate a story where Jesus turns to his disciples and tells them, "if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move

from here to there', and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you."

On this morning, a week after the riots in Charlottesville, decades after the Nazis attempted to destroy the Jews of Europe, over a century after the implementation of the Jim Crow laws of racial segregation, four centuries after the enslavement of millions of Africans in North America began, which do you think would be harder to move with just a grain of faith – Mt Marcy, the highest and most majestic peak in all of the Adirondacks, or the seemingly stony, and immovable heart of God?

For we have been praying since the days our European ancestors first arrived on the shores of North America, to a God who is called Father and Mother, to visit on our land true brotherhood. Only to see our streets engulfed in the flames of racial violence year after year.

For we have been praying since the end of the Civil War, to a God who is called Love, to visit on our hearts a true love for one another. Only to see ourselves treat each other in the most dehumanizing and demeaning ways.

For we have been praying since the days of the Holocaust, to a God who is called the King of Israel, for a spirit of true humanity to engender equality among all people. Only to hear the taunts, “Jew will not replace us,” shouted from torch lit processions.

For we have been praying this past week, to a God called Truth, for our leaders to tell the truth about the sin of white supremacy and its evil hold on our nation’s psyche. Only to hear silence and equivocation and excuses and blame.

Tell me, after this past week, which do you think would be harder to move with just a grain of faith – Mt Marcy, the highest and most majestic peak in all of the Adirondacks, or the seemingly stony, immovable heart of God?

We are, as a people, tormented by a demon. And the reality that our prayers betray is an experience of possession by a power that we seem unable to resist, and certainly haven't been able to exorcize.

Like the Canaanite woman of this morning's reading, we have approached our God, and the one who comes in her name, Jesus the Christ, for mercy, for intervention, for redemption from the demon that has taken over the spirit of our nation. Whose leering grimace stares back at us from the chants and taunts of the Neo-Nazis and white supremacists that have claimed a moral victory since last weekend's violence.

And what has God's response been? Where have we heard Jesus answer us?

“But he did not answer her at all.”

That is how the authors of Matthew tell us that Jesus first responds to the woman seeking mercy. Silence. That is the word that many African American commentators have used over the last week to describe the response of white America to their pleas for justice and true brotherhood even as white nationalists talk about their plans to turn the United States into a pure ethnostate. Silence. Silence in our churches, silence in our town councils, silence in our schools. And are our African American brothers and sisters not as disappointed in white America, as we might be in Jesus as he responds to the Canaanite woman's desperate plea with – silence?

After this past week perhaps African Americans might ask themselves, which do I think would be harder to move with just a grain of faith – Mt Marcy, the highest and most majestic peak in all of the Adirondacks, or the seemingly stony, immovable heart of white America?

And what about Jesus' followers? What about those of us who call ourselves Christians because we have made Jesus, and his teachings, foundational for how we think about our lives, and respond to the needs of our world?

Do we recognize any part of ourselves in how the disciples respond to the woman crying for help?

Faced with the dissolution of her daughter under the spell of a demon the Canaanite woman pleads for the younger woman's life. Over and over again she shouts for mercy and healing. Seeing her

daughter slip away her mother will not stop trying to find a cure.

And so she approaches Jesus and his disciples. But instead of Jesus' silence silencing her, the mother becomes louder in her pleas, she risks it all for the one she loves. And the disciples, instead of having any compassion, complain that the woman is annoying them.

Our black brothers and sisters are calling out to us, to white America, to an America that often prides itself in being steeped in the Christian faith, that they are under attack from a spirit who seeks to destroy them, that seeks to imprison their spirits, and reduce them to a subhuman state – a spirit that like a ghost glows with whiteness.

In response, haven't we heard that we're going to need to get over Charlottesville, because we've got to get back to work and pass a national budget, and health care reform? Haven't we heard that the protestors, and those calling out white supremacy, are just

belaboring the issue? And the deepest irony is that it was our President who couldn't let the issue go and has had to keep doubling down day after day on his position. Isn't it the truth that it is really white America that can't let go of its privilege and all the ways it benefits from a racist society?

Yes, many in white America ask that those who will not stop talking about Charlottesville "be sent away," that they've had their say, when it is we who should be looking deeply into our own hearts and sending away our internalized racism.

After this past week we might ask ourselves, which do you think would be harder to move with just a grain of faith – Mt Marcy, the highest and most majestic peak in all of the Adirondacks, or white America's seemingly stony, immovable heart?

But the woman doesn't give up. She keeps going.

In the face of Jesus' silence, in response to the disciples' annoyed frustration with her ceaseless pleas for mercy, the Canaanite woman moves and puts herself right before Jesus. And she demands again, "Lord, help me."

And Jesus' icy response is, I think, one of the hardest things to hear in all of the gospels:

He says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

This statement challenges everything I believe about Jesus. Where is the savior filled with love and compassion for those who suffer, and who are outcasts? Where is Jesus the one who shows us how to move past all of the boundaries that separate us so that we can live

together as one human family? Where is the healer and teacher who turns no one away?

Was all of the rest of the gospel message a sermon Jesus felt he had to say on Saturday? Only to reveal his true beliefs on Monday?

To call someone a dog is to demean them and question their humanity. It is to suggest that they are not entitled to the mercy and blessing of human life.

African Americans have been called dogs.

Jews have been called dogs.

Women have often been referred to with a slur describing female dogs.

Our culture is infused with the type of dehumanization we see drop from Jesus' lips in this story.

After hearing Jesus refer to the Canaanite woman as a dog we might ask ourselves, which do you think would be harder to move with just a grain of faith – Mt Marcy, the highest and most majestic peak in all of the Adirondacks, or the seemingly stony, immovable heart of Jesus?

But the woman doesn't give up. She keeps going.

She calls Jesus' bluff. She accepts the logic of his curse and teaches him, the one she has called Lord, that even dogs, even the most marginalized human is entitled to a basic humanity. She teaches Jesus that every human has the right to blessing.

“Yes, Lord,” she says, “yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

And I think in this moment the miracle happens. The seemingly immovable is moved. Jesus’ heart transforms, and his eyes open to see, not a dog kneeling before him, but a human, a woman who is his sister. And this miracle happens because of the woman’s persistence, because of her faith.

Black America is once again standing before the spirit of white American and is asking all of us to open our eyes and see, not a pack of dogs, not a group of second class citizens, but the children of God who deserve all of the blessings and healing that white America takes for granted.

This morning we ask ourselves, “Will a miracle occur”? Will the seemingly immovable heart of America be moved? Will God visit on our national heart a spirit of love and brotherhood?

For the hope that our scriptures give us this morning is that our collective response can be, just like Jesus:

“Let it be done for you as you wish.”

The hope that sees beyond the present, and into a future that is not yet born, is that the promise of our country can one day be lived into fully. That one day, this nation will be able to live under, and within, the vision of God’s dream for humanity. A dream where there will no longer be hatred based on race, where it will no longer be acceptable to curse and demean those of a different heritage and religion, where America can finally be exorcised of the demon that has haunted us since our inception.

But what today's reading tells us is that our dream for our nation, and for all of humanity, will not be achieved the first time, nor the second time, nor perhaps the third time. That calls for justice and brotherhood among all people will have to be made over and over and over again. And that we should not give up hope, that we should not lose faith, if the miracle of transformation is not attained in the first try.

Yesterday, I joined members of this congregation at the foot of Spruce Hill Road to witness to our belief that Black Lives Matter, not at the exclusion of white lives, but to bring attention to the ongoing racism of our nation. It is not the first time I, or they, have attended such an event. And it won't be the last time.

Because the fight for racial justice and equality in our country is a fight that may not be completed in our lifetimes, or in the lifetimes

of our children. But our scriptures tell us that we are not allowed to give up the sacred work of love just because it may never be fulfilled. Like the Canaanite woman, we can never give up on those we love.

So hear the good news; hear the hope that faith can imagine.

One day God will fully respond to the pleas of our African American brothers and sisters. One day God will answer the pleas of white America to be delivered from the demon of white supremacy. One day, with just a grain of faith, it will be easier to move the seemingly stony, immovable heart of each one of us instead of Mt Marcy, the highest and most majestic peak in all of the Adirondacks.

AMEN.