

## **Sermons from Park Hill: February 3, 2008**

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**Sermons from  
Park Hill Congregational UCC  
Denver, Colorado**

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**February 3, 2008**

**Matthew 15: 21-28**

**“Annoying Persistence”**

Before studying this passage, I didn't know that the story of the Canaanite woman has been handed down for centuries in African American communities for its significant message of persistence in the midst of humiliation. I hadn't made the connection that the Canaanite woman is of African descent. This opens up all kinds of new understandings. Looking at this story now from the perspective of a Black Woman gives it a whole new meaning and I can't help but think about it differently.

It's a story based in a reality we can understand – clearly grounded in systemic injustice. She came seeking healing for her daughter, wasn't part of the majority group who held the power, historically excluded, and a bunch of men complained that she was annoying them. They don't succeed in shooing her away because she is so persistent, so they went whining to Jesus to get him to send her away. She's a pest that keeps bothering us. But here's what is so

shocking about the story: What is so shocking is that Jesus doesn't rebuke the disciples. He doesn't scold them for trying to get rid of her.

Remember when the disciples tried to keep the kids away and Jesus responded, “bring the little ones to me, for to them belongs the kingdom of heaven.” But, instead of giving a more characteristically compassionate response, he makes it worse – that helping her was the equivalent of throwing food to the dogs. Why should I waste my time on the likes of you? Imagine hearing that from this legendary healer, recognized as a deeply spiritual man. Yet, despite this humiliation, she persists – she talks back, argues – until she receives what she came to get: a blessing; healing for her daughter.

And she ultimately secured justice for her people as well. Matthew gives this unnamed Canaanite woman credit for changing the heart and mind of Jesus – for converting him – to a more inclusive mission than just his own people – a remedy to justice long-delayed.

To take this story seriously, we must know that it would have been unheard of, and dangerous, for a woman to talk back to a man like she did – a foreign woman with a darker complexion. It would have been even less likely that she would be taken seriously – listen to those annoyed disciples. But ultimately, what she did echoes the words of Mary's Magnificat: in the end, the disciples were taken down a notch and the woman was lifted up. Against the odds, there were two miracles that day: one for her daughter, who was healed just because of her faith and annoying persistence; and a miracle for her people, victims of systemic exclusion, now included. We can't just look at the personal implications of this

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story, satisfied that this is just about the woman and her daughter.

Like the unnamed Canaanite woman, those we honor during Black History Month show us how they persisted for the sake of others through humiliation, derisive labels, degradation, and disappointment in America. But, to take Black History Month seriously, we can't forget that this not only *was* but often still *is* the reality – an injustice built into the systems by which our country is governed.

We must look for and listen to the stories of inspiration – the often hidden ones, not forgetting the many nameless heroes – but then be inspired by the call for us to continue with the same annoying persistence. It's not done. For example, when affirmative action was introduced in the 1965, the dream was stated: "not just equality as a right and a theory, but equality as a fact and as a result." Equality as a fact has a ways to go.

Jesus settled the question of our equality in the eyes of God – case closed. The answer to the question of our equality, as our earthly *reality*, is not yet complete, as much as we may wish we were done with it all, that this is all about a month of history.

For example, some in the U.S. – a growing number – think the time for things like affirmative action – or any other remedies – has passed: "It's been decades," they'll say. Debates about the "success" of affirmative action are not usually for the sake of finding better solutions for achieving justice long-delayed. Those who want to get rid of it – the shell of what remains – aren't arguing for anything better. We are told that underperforming schools, the disproportionate number of prison inmates of color, employment statistics in the inner cities, gaps of every kind, have nothing to do with systemic

inequities but are the result of bad planning and parenting. If "they" would get their act together, we'd stop discriminating against the wealthy, who "bear the brunt of the burden of the lower classes." Listen to every debate on taxes.

But, as historian Roger Wilkins has pointed out: African Americans have a nearly 400-year history on this continent: almost 250 in slavery, another 100 in Jim Crow's legalized discrimination, and less than 50 involving anything else. Remedies are not complete. They're hardly a concern anymore. Progress has been made, but it feels like the solutions just keep getting more complex, and that progress keeps getting rolled back. For instance, the trend seems to be going toward a re-segregation. What will history say about 2008?

In a poem, Maya Angelou says,

"Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise."

So, I asked some African American friends to name figures in black history that have been personally significant to them - persons other than Martin Luther King. Who shaped their dreams and hopes? Who inspired them to persist?

Two of them named the Canaanite women of *their* times: Harriet Tubman leading people – sometimes literally dragging them – on the Underground Railroad, risking her life for the liberation of others. And Sojourner Truth – this massive woman of faith, both in stature and heart – who stood up for herself in unimaginable ways and persisted.

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Sometimes the stories were closer to home. One of my friends, Art's sister, named their parents. Reminiscent of some of your stories, theirs was the first African American family to move to a particular suburb back in Cleveland and they paid the consequences - their front window was bombed out. A cross was burned on the lawn. But, they did not move. They walked to school everyday hearing the N word. But they did not stop walking. The worst thing, she said, was the ostracism. "I knew I wasn't wanted, but I knew *what* I wanted" and it caused her to persevere, keeping, as she said, her eyes on a greater prize.

But it was the example of her parents that laid that strong foundation. Their father grew up in a dangerous era for a black man, but for the sake of his children, moved for better schools and opportunities. Their father endured hardships, working 2-3 jobs for that opportunity. Their mother, like many, worked at times as a domestic, even one time embarrassingly cleaning for the family of one of her classmates. But like the Canaanite woman, she did this for her daughter, and more. She then went back to school and was able to pursue better jobs. Art's sister explained that this was an incentive for her - "I don't want to struggle like this." They experienced humiliation, physical danger, derisive names, and disappointment in their neighbors. But they persisted and changed things for others - and now she's a lawyer with an MBA. Black history, of course, is still being made today.

I'm still learning about the storied history of the Park Hill neighborhood. Marge Gilbert gave me a stack of papers this week with stories about how the neighborhood changed and how this and 5 other churches responded. Many of you sitting in the pews today were part of this change, but many others of us

don't know things - like how realtors were playing games to induce panic-selling and how the pastors and members of six neighborhood churches created an organization to not only quell the panicked white flight but create attitudes that would welcome newer African American residents and celebrate the gifts they would bring. I'd love to know more of the real story and how the churches were affected internally. Were there angry families who left the church? How did the churches stay together? Is that annoying persistence not just in our history but can we find a way to put our passion for racial justice back at the forefront again today?

Being on the front lines of any change - whether it's by your choice or not - requires that at times we are that annoying voice who won't give up or shut up until a blessing and justice are received.

In her book *Daughters of Dignity: African Women in the Bible and the Virtues of Black Womanhood*, LaVerne McCain Gill calls the Canaanite woman "determined, defiant, and rebellious" - annoying enough that the disciples complain about her. She's a threat to the disciples, representing an unwanted outsider - a different race, language, color; a pagan, and in her own community, a nobody. But as Gill says, perseverance is the only refuge for the disenfranchised.

She compares her with a lesser known woman in black history: Fannie Lou Hamer. She was a share cropper who founded a political party - the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Southern Democrats were racists. They needed another vehicle to work toward voting rights. She combined religious fervor with political activism. She promoted the belief that God was on the side of the oppressed.

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She also taught that God would deliver and transform the hearts of the southern politicians.

She was born in 1917, the youngest of 20 children. Like so many others, at age 6 she was picking cotton. It would appear that her life was destined to end in the fields of Mississippi, eeking out a living as a sharecropper, a second-class citizen. In her quest, Hamer endured beatings, personal terrorism, economic reprisals and death threats. Those tactics, however, were no match for her thirst and determination. Her most famous quote is "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired." In the encyclopedia *Black Women in America*, she is quoted in 1965 saying: I remember one time a man came to me after the students began to work in Mississippi, and he said the white people were getting tired and they were getting tense and anything might happen. Well, I asked him, "How long he thinks we had been getting tired?" I have been tired for 46 years, my parents was tired before me, and their parent's were tired."

The Canaanite woman's actions tell Jesus, "I will not go away until you perform a blessing for me because I am sick and tired of being sick and tired." Heal my daughter. My people don't deserve to be second class, stuck with crumbs. By her persistence, hope for other outcasts standing there that day was planted.

The Canaanite woman is in a line with other African women in the Bible, who expanded the notion of who is chosen. Abraham's firstborn child was born of an Egyptian woman, Hagar. The Hebrew's first convert was a Canaanite woman, Rahab. When the Queen of Sheba visited Solomon, she praised his God and earned the right to sit in judgment of the Pharisees in the end time. Moses' first wife was a Midianite and his adopted mother was an Egyptian. Thus, God is

not and was not meant for the lost sheep of Israel only. Jesus knew this, but did his followers? They would now. And by writing it so clearly, by putting such shocking words in Jesus' mouth, Matthew makes sure that all of us as disciples are clear about it too.

Our world has been continuously expanded by persistent women of African descent: Bessie Coleman the explorer, Mary McLeod Bethune the educator and advisor to a President, the entrepreneur Madam CJ Walker who became millionaire, Jane Wright in medicine, actress Josephine Baker and Phyllis Wheatly, the abolitionist poet. And the first of our handouts this month: Ida B. Wells. She was an anti-lynching crusader who has suddenly (can you believe it?) become relevant again in 2007. Nooses once again hung from trees in the South...

What did Jesus do in our gospel text? He was moved – and I think pleased - by the persistence of this woman, who opened the way for healing, a river in the desert of oppression, a spring of fresh water for survival. We owe a debt of gratitude to those who made and still make history for our sake. To those in our pews today who pass this legacy on to us. There's a lot for us to learn, because we need as much annoying persistence as ever to achieve what continues to allude us. I would like to see us become annoyingly persistent again – in not just words but actions – to address the continuing legacy of systemic injustice based on race – justice long-delayed. What can our church do? We may need direction; but the Canaanite woman opened the way.