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**Gospel Changes**  
**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH**

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting at us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. Matthew 15:21-28

There is a lot in today's Gospel that can make us uncomfortable and can be hard to hear. Mostly because it doesn't make Jesus look good, or at least, challenges the always compassionate and caring image of Jesus many of us have been taught. One of the first things in today's Gospel that might make us cringe is Jesus ignored the cries of a mother asking him to heal her daughter even though she used messianic titles to refer to Jesus. We heard in today's Gospel that was how he initially responded to her cries. The disciples don't seem to be uncomfortable with Jesus ignoring the woman. They told him to send her away because she was making them uncomfortable with all her shouting.

We might be surprised Jesus responded by trying to do as his disciples suggested, because that is not what happens in other places in the Gospel. He told the woman he wasn't going to help her because she wasn't Jewish, reminding her and us that he came first to remind God's chosen people of their purpose. Which was the understanding many scholars had about the role of the Messiah. That is when the woman stopped shouting, fell to her knees, and asked Jesus for help. Even when she was at her most vulnerable, Jesus still said no. And he didn't just say no, he called her a demeaning name, he called her a dog, which I admit makes me feel uncomfortable.

And I am not alone. There have been pages and pages and pages of commentaries written that try to explain Jesus' uncomfortable behavior. Some say

he was tired others say he was frustrated that people came to him for miracles but didn't seem to care to understand what those miracles were pointing to. Others say the Canaanites were another people who were oppressing the Jewish people economically and culturally, so it was a pretty common practice for Jews to call Canaanites dogs. A few add that Jesus had a master plan for his ministry, that he was going to include all the people in the world in the redemption he was bringing but that wouldn't happen until after his death and resurrection. Which is why scholars like N. T. Wright claim here is a woman demanding Easter when Jesus himself hasn't even gotten to Holy Week. She was making Jesus uncomfortable by messing up his plan, by asking for something before it was time.

All these explanations might help ease our discomfort with Jesus' behavior a bit. But no matter how empathetic or scholarly, these explanations can't take away the discomfort it might cause that in today's Gospel Jesus changed his mind. The idea of Jesus changing his mind might make some folks uncomfortable because we tend to believe God is unchanging, and if Jesus is the Son of God, we imagine Jesus would have known everything God knows and therefore would not change.

Perhaps that logic, as comforting as it might be, isn't Biblical. Because there are times in scripture when God changed God's mind. My favorite is the story of Jonah. I'm sure you remember the story of the prophet Jonah who God called to travel to Nineveh and tell the people there that God was so displeased with them God was going to destroy them and their city. Most of the time I think we remember the first part of the story, where Jonah went in the opposite direction God wanted, so God sent a storm that got Jonah tossed into the sea where he was swallowed by a great big fish. That is a fun detail we like to debate or find so hard to believe we chalk it up as a children's story and leave it. But there is more to Jonah than a big fish.

Once he got to Nineveh, Jonah did as God asked. He told the people they were in trouble. And the people listened to Jonah. The king declared a city wide fast to show repentance. Jonah didn't pay attention to that. He went outside the city to watch it burn. But God did pay attention. And God changed God's mind and spared the people of Nineveh. This did not sit well with Jonah. After all, he had endured being in a fish belly and all. He was upset with God because he thought God's change of heart and mind made him look bad. But God responded by showing Jonah God is God, and if God wants to spare the lives of people and animals, especially when they repent, that is God's prerogative, because ultimately God cares for them.

So, we could say it is part of God's nature as God is revealed in scripture to change.

But there are different kinds of change in the world. Many of us are overwhelmed right now with all the changes that seem to be happening all at once with the COVID-19 pandemic, the renewed concern with systemic racism, and the changing world of politics, just to name a few. And we can probably agree that not all changes are good changes. Changes that cause harm, job loss, illness, or death, for example. So, how do we discern which changes are good?

That's where today's Gospel comes in. Because the change Jesus made was a change that didn't cause harm, it was life-renewing to the woman's daughter and it was life-giving to the woman who was an outsider who asked Jesus for help because it showed Jesus heard her and allowed what she said to change him. Scholars also note that from this point on in Matthew's Gospel Jesus' message of who to bring the Good News to is no longer limited to one group of people but is to all the people of the world. That's a powerful change. It's a resurrection life change. One that shows the redemption and restoration to wholeness God intended for all people all along. And it shows that God truly does desire to be in relationship with us, because listening to each other and changing is part of the dynamic of being in a loving relationship.

While it can be uncomfortable seeing Jesus change his mind, this event from Matthew's Gospel can be a powerful reminder that if Jesus can change, then so can those of us who follow him. Perhaps it even implies part of what it means to follow Jesus is to be open to this kind of change, change that reveals God's love to the world.

This kind of change reminds me of a folk song from the early 1970's called *Gospel Changes*. The chorus of the song goes: "I listened to what the good book says and it makes good sense to me, talking about reaping what you're sowing, and people longing to be free, now we got new names and faces this time around, Gospel changes are, still going down." The song reminds me there is a kind of change that isn't simply good, there is a type of on-going change that is holy, that is part of the Kingdom of God, and it makes sense to me to call those kinds of changes Gospel Changes.

As the global pandemic grinds on, many of us at Church of the Good Shepherd realized we needed to make some Gospel Changes to our ministries to adapt them to the changes the pandemic has caused. So, our Wednesday Free Lunch feeding program has changed from dining in our hall into being outside offering a sack lunch

to go. While it looks quite different, we are still offering a free lunch to anyone who wants one, but with fewer risks that could lead to transmission of the virus. Likewise, our Sunday morning worship service must change so we can gather with minimal risk by having the service outside, doing Morning Prayer in place of Holy Eucharist, everyone wears masks and stays at least six feet apart. Our coffee shop ministry is also returning, but it too will be outside and to-go only. While these changes might seem drastic, and they can make us uncomfortable, they are changes we made in order to continue to offer ways for people to connect in-person to the love of God through Christ and one another here at Church of the Good Shepherd during the pandemic.

These Gospel Changes might inspire us to look at other areas in our lives where God might be calling us through the cries of our neighbors to change. Perhaps this change might be in how we view people who are different from ourselves, be they different age, color, race, religion, gender, education level, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, or identity. Perhaps another way to view the change Jesus made was to listen to and acknowledge the belovedness of people who are different. This is the kind of change that could end racism, sexism, and so many of the “isms” that unnecessarily divide humanity.

Like all change, Gospel Changes can make us feel uncomfortable. And when we feel uncomfortable, it is tempting to ignore the discomfort, or try to get rid of it, like the disciples did in today’s Gospel. It is can also be tempting to fight or reject the change. Jesus shows us Gospel Changes happen when we, like Jesus, are willing to be in that discomfort and listen to what is causing us discomfort and with God’s help we can see beyond our comfort or lack thereof to the Holy in our midst. That is how we can grow as followers of Christ and it is another way God’s Kingdom of God’s redeeming, renewing, healing, joyful, life-giving love grows deeper and more present here on earth.