

11th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 15a
Isaiah 56:1, 6-8
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32
Matthew 15: [10-20] 21-28

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There's great value in being willing to change your mind.

When George Wallace was sworn in as governor of Alabama in 1963, crowds of his supporters were wearing white flowers to symbolize white supremacy. His speech that day became a rallying cry: "Segregation now. Segregation tomorrow. And segregation forever." Under his watch crosses were burned, fire hoses and police dogs turned on protesters. He stood in the schoolhouse door to prevent black students from enrolling at the University of Alabama. Martin Luther King Jr. called Wallace "the most dangerous racist in America."

But in later years, he changed. George Wallace was shot in 1972 and used a wheelchair after that. As time went on, he repented of his bigotry. He reached out to civil rights activists and appeared in black churches to ask forgiveness. In his last election as governor of Alabama, in 1982, he won with more than 90 percent of the black vote. When George Wallace died in 1998, Congressman John Lewis reflected, "Rarely does our country witness such a conversion by an elected official. Such a conversion of principle can be shaped only by courage and conviction." (NY Times, "Forgiving George Wallace," 9/16/98)

There is great value in being willing to change your mind.

Today's scripture shows Jesus changing his mind for the sake of God's healing, saving love.

It's not a very flattering story. When a Canaanite woman came to Jesus for help, his first reaction was to reject her. It was only later that Jesus changed his mind in a way that opens everything up for us.

It's true this woman was the wrong kind of person for Jesus to be dealing with. She was pagan and grew up worshipping fertility gods instead of the one true God of Israel. Faithful Jews had nothing but disgust for Canaanites like her. They called them "dogs," which was a racial slur.

And it's true that Jesus didn't have much time to deal with an outsider like her. He was mobbed by his own Jewish people bringing their sick for healing, babies crying, people

moaning, hands reaching out to touch his robes. There was so much need, Jesus had to focus his energies and be clear on his calling – which he believed was to focus on God’s chosen people, the Jews awaiting a Messiah. So Jesus put the woman off: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” As if to imply, “You don’t think I came to save the whole world, do you??”

Well as it turned out, that’s exactly why Jesus did come – to bring God’s healing, saving power to the whole world. But Jesus was in the process of learning what that meant.

The disciples said, “Send that woman away!” But she persisted, because her daughter had a demon. And if you’ve ever had a son or daughter in real trouble, you recognize what drove her. Her courage and cleverness paid off -- out of all four gospels, this Canaanite woman is the only person who ever got the better of Jesus in an argument.

You can see the shift take place. How Jesus at first ignored her, then put her off, then, sensed her strong will and seemed to test her. “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” he said. Meaning, you’re not even part of God’s family, woman, you’re just a Canaanite dog (we can hardly bear to hear Jesus speak this slur!).

But the woman had strong, humble faith, as well as a deep, desperate need. She knelt down before Jesus and respectfully insisted: “Even the dogs deserve their dinner, Lord!” And then I imagine a flash of humor coming across Jesus’ face, a smile and a nod of his head: “So be it, woman!” Or as one translation says, “Woman, your faith is something else. What you want is what you get!” (Message Bible) And her daughter was healed.

Finally Jesus recognized this woman’s conviction that God was truly alive in Jesus. Yes, she was an outsider, but she believed the God of Israel had power to help her. And who was Jesus to stand in the way of God-given faith like that? Who was he to deny this Canaanite her rightful place in God’s family?

Jesus changed his mind for the sake of God’s healing, saving love. Thanks be to God.

What’s disturbing, of course, is that this woman had to force Jesus to take a second look. He had drawn his circle of concern so small that he would have shut her out, based on ethnicity. Thank goodness Jesus was willing to change his mind! It’s a model for all of us who want to be part of God’s healing, saving love.

Why would the Bible preserve such an unflattering story about our Savior? Because there’s something here we need. We need the warning against small-minded prejudice, which ensnares human beings in every generation. We need to see how God keeps drawing our circles of concern wider and wider. And we need this powerful example of

Jesus changing his mind, learning and growing in the same ways we need to learn and grow – for the sake of God’s healing, saving love.

Some people do consider this interpretation dangerous, even blasphemous. To suggest that Jesus was not perfect all the time, to point out how the human side of our Lord was on display in this instance – even for the sake of the greater good. It freaks some Christians out, especially the kind who like their religion black-and-white, cut and dried.

I know, because a couple years ago our forum did a book study called *Sacred Strangers*, and we invited the author Nancy Haught to speak on this scripture passage and others. Somehow that drew the weirdos out of the woodwork. One day a self-righteous young man from some fellowship or cult showed up at church to accuse me of false teaching. On Sunday he came to Nancy’s lecture and spoke up to say her interpretation was blasphemous and he feared for our souls. I have no idea why he targeted our church, but it goes to show. Some people want their answers set in stone. They can’t handle any grey areas.

But human life is full of grey areas. Religion that denies this is not much use to people like you and me, or George Wallace, when we need to make moral choices in changing times. And it’s not faithful to our Savior, who kept on widening the circle of saving love, pushing the boundaries, responding to all humans in need of God’s mercy and acceptance. Reminding every person that nothing can separate us from God’s love, not flawed theology, not differences in culture or nationality or custom. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, and nothing should separate us from the children of God who God treasures.

There is such great value in being willing to change your mind. With our world constantly changing, it is a gift from God to be able to learn and grow and change throughout a lifetime, and we pray for God to help all humanity learn and grow and change throughout history.

Right now I’m reading a book that’s changing what I thought I knew about American history. It’s called *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. It goes step by step through 400 years and outlines all the ways racist ideas have influenced our country. There is so much I didn’t know! And so much I didn’t want to see, as a white woman of privilege and means. I won’t lie – it’s challenging. I can only read a little at a time, because it’s a lot to take in. But I know the way forward, the way toward God’s healing and saving love, includes changing my mind in this kind of way. Recognizing not just what I thought was true, but what is really true, as clearly as I can.

Jesus changed his mind for the sake of God's healing, saving love – and really that's the calling for all of us.

Once upon a time, people thought the message of Christ was only meant for people who were born Jewish. But people's minds changed, for the sake of saving love. The early church began to welcome non-Jewish people, Gentiles, from all cultures, and gave birth to a new kind of respectfully intercultural Christian community that we try to keep emulating even today.

Once upon a time, people assumed that slavery was "just the way things are." But people's minds changed. Now we realize that slavery was promoting economic interests at the expense of human life, and we reject it, along with all its repercussions down through generations.

Once upon a time, people assumed that homosexuality was somehow "against nature." But now we understand that being gay is in the nature of many people, this orientation is coded into who a person is. Our collective minds have changed in the direction of healing, saving love.

Once upon a time, women were considered the weaker sex... the husband was ordained to be head of the household... children were meant to be seen and not heard... people with disabilities were deemed less-than fully human...

What other incorrect assumptions have we absorbed, that we need to examine... for the sake of God's healing, saving love?

Far from being dangerous or disturbing, I see great hope in the scripture story we shared today. I see it as a model for us. Because if Jesus can change his mind and change his behavior for the sake of saving, healing love – then we can too. We can repent, we can take responsibility, we can change course, we can learn a new way... to more lovingly share this life we have with God and one another.

And we can learn the most important thing. That God's healing, saving love is broader and more generous than we can ever imagine. God's healing, saving love is for everyone – mistake makers, self-righteous finger-pointers, all of us. Because many of us, maybe even most of us, wonder if we truly are acceptable to others and to God. We wonder: if people really knew me, how could anybody love me?

We come to worship today to meet the Lord who does truly know us, and does fully love us. We meet the Lord who came to save the whole world and leave no person outside the circle of God's family, not even us. No matter what we bring with us into God's presence, here we find forgiveness that cleanses us, and the opportunity to begin again.

No matter how others may see us, God sees us shining with the light of a precious and unique person, a beloved child, a cherished daughter or son who belongs in God's family. Thank God Jesus didn't abandon that Canaanite woman, but saw into her heart and drew her into God's love. Thank God Jesus doesn't abandon us, but draws us into the circle of God's love, forever.

Thanks be to God. Amen.