

SERMON..... *From Ugliness, a Beauty Emerges*Pastor Susan

This week's chapter in "We Make the Road by Walking" is about contradicting stories in scripture. There's plenty of them. But McLaren points to those pesky Canaanites. In the scripture I shared, Jesus views this woman who is not a Jew as a "dog." Calling someone a "dog" in those days is like calling someone the "n-word" today. It was a vile, hate-filled name. Yet, the woman persisted and convinced Jesus that even "dogs" need God's grace. Jesus then commended her for her faith and healed her daughter.

Now we can see this story as Jesus changing his mind, or we can see this story as Jesus demonstrating for all the disciples who were observing, how we must not exclude but take on God's inclusive nature for ourselves. Either way we see Jesus in this story, the point is the same – Canaanites are people too.

McLaren offers an opposing scripture to this Jesus story. It's from Deuteronomy and it's the story where God tells the Israelites to go and slaughter all the people living in the promised land. That would be the Canaanites. What are we to do with two diametrically opposed scriptures about the same group of people? One story says, "Wipe those heathens out!" The other says, "Those heathens are no different from you and they are loved by God." Which one is true?

For me, when in doubt, I always, always, always side with Jesus. But we all must acknowledge that although we all probably side with Jesus regarding the Canaanite woman in principle, our world sides with Deuteronomy and conquest, and annihilating our enemy, and so on. Someone in Wednesday night's class asked, "How do we go from the OT message to the NT message?"

That's a conundrum. It seems that somewhere in the world, there is always a war going on. There is always an "enemy." There is always an "us" and "them." Is Jesus just setting the bar too high for us to even consider moving our thinking away from the idea that we can have peace if we violently attack our enemy, to the idea that we can have peace if we love our neighbor, including our perceived enemy.

After 9/11, as the country moved into a mindset of seeking retaliation, Ken offered another response. One that was not at all popular in the deep south of Georgia and was quite offensive to many. His proposed response to the tragedy was, "Let's build a huge monument in the center of Ground Zero in honor of Islam."

Let's think about that for a minute. That response is the absolute opposite of what so many of us felt. We were a country in mourning and a country traumatized. How could Ken even suggest such an audacious idea? How could he even consider honoring the enemy? But remember what George W. Bush said in the shadow of 9/11? He carefully defined the scope of the enemy as extremists who use Islam to their own ends. Ken simply believed that if we built a monument to Islam at Ground Zero, we are proclaiming to all the Muslim world: you are our neighbor. You are not the "other," you are all God's beloved. And in that act, he believed, that would promote world peace better than any violent retaliation. Think about it, honoring Islam would take all the fuel away from the extremists who used Islam as the reason for their violence. Honoring Muslims would castrate the terrorists. That would be a much more effective way to establish world peace.

Now, not to compare Ken to Jesus, but honestly isn't that something Jesus would do? In the story of the vile Canaanite woman, Jesus reframed the idea of an "us" and "them." Jesus invited into his fold the one who was seen as unworthy of God's love. He included those people who were different from the

Jewish people like himself; people who had different skin colors, and cultures, and languages, and belief systems. Not only did he include the Canaanite woman, but he elevated her as a model of one who has extraordinary faith. A woman whom we should strive to be like.

Jesus continually tried to turn our thinking away from an “us” and “them” and toward a “we.” And not just a “we” with others who think like us, but toward a “we” that includes everyone with a heartbeat, everyone with hopes and dreams of their own. Let us together sing the song that God would have us sing on this day when we remember the wars of the world.