

Opening Space
Matthew 15:21-28
July 12, 2020

Once there was a woman who lived in a little central European village. She was a nurse and had devoted her good life to caring for her neighbors. She was there for them at birth and at death; she bound up her scratches, their bruises, their broken bones, and she sat through endless nights with those who were seriously ill.

In the course of time the nurse died. She had no family in the village so the villagers decided to hold a very lovely funeral for her. But the village priest had to remind them that she could not be buried in the town cemetery, for the village was Roman Catholic and she had been a Protestant. The villagers protested, but the priest held firm. It was not easy for him because she had nursed him as well. Nevertheless, the canons of the church were very clear; she would have to be buried outside the fence.

The day of the funeral arrived. The entire village accompanied her casket to the cemetery, where she was buried—outside the fence. Then that night after dark, villagers returned to the cemetery and deliberately, with heart, moved the fence!

Would that there was such heart, commitment, and passion to removing the dividing lines that divide our society on so many levels today. Living with division is not new; it seems to be human nature. In today's story we see the dividing lines between Jews and Gentiles in Jesus' day. The animosity between the races was sealed in their tradition and law.

Jesus is familiar with this tension and he seems to reflect it in his response to the Canaanite woman. She knows of Jesus' reputation as a healer. Using sacred language she acknowledges her respect of Jesus and in desperation cries out for his help for her daughter. Jesus doesn't speak or acknowledge her presence. The disciples are bothered by the woman and try to get rid of her. Jesus states his position, "My mission is only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

The woman persists. She says, "Lord, help me." Jesus replies with a harsh insult, a racial slur. He refers to Gentiles as "dogs." He says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The woman is quick and creative with her response, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat from under the master's table." She is prepared to beg like a dog under the master's table if that's what it takes to get Jesus' help. Jesus is surprised by the woman's persistent faith and finally offers his blessing, "Woman, great is your faith!"

The Canaanite woman confronts Jesus' narrow perspective and changes his mind. Her understanding that even the outsider is worthy of leftover crumbs offers a new insight. Jesus extends his mission and his identity. He moves the fence to be inclusive of Gentiles as well as Jews.

The polarization in our society seems to be solidifying. People are entrenched in their perspectives and unwilling to budge. I had hoped that the pandemic would be a uniting force, prompting us to channel our disparate energies into a common goal of maintaining the health of our nation and our world. COVID-19 does not appear to be a force that will unite us. But like the Canaanite woman, we can persist in our mission to break down barriers and move fences toward God's reign of love and justice. Let's see what the Canaanite woman might teach us.

She reflects what she knows of Jesus. She calls him “Lord, Son of David,” a sign that she is venturing out of her comfort zone to recognize this Jewish teacher. She reveals a portion of her story, sharing that she is a mother desperate for healing for her daughter. Although initially rebuffed by Jesus, she continues to seek connection with him. Jesus states his position. The woman asks a question, which encourages Jesus to expand his thinking and embrace a fresh understanding of his own message.

Dr. David Campt developed a communications approach called RACE, an acronym for Reflect. Ask. Connect. Expand.ⁱ This approach relies on active listening, empathy, and personal storytelling. His work focuses on helping white people engage other white persons in conversations about racism. His approach is instructive for participating in any conversation where there are known differences in opinion and perspective.

R is for Reflect. It begins by intentionally preparing ourselves for conversation for the purpose of listening and understanding where another person is coming from. If we show up to a conversation loaded with ammunition or with “a chip on our shoulder,” we are more likely to increase the tension and jeopardize progress in the relationship. Then as we listen, we reflect what we’re hearing. “I hear you say that...It seems that you....” Listening is a sign of basic human respect. Another aspect of Reflect is considering one’s own experience and perspective to be ready to articulate it when appropriate later in the conversation. Reflecting on our attitude, our perspective, and on what we hear from the conversation partner lays a plank in a bridge that crosses the divide.

A is for Ask. Asking curiosity questions indicates our genuine interest in hearing and understanding. Questions should probe for the beliefs and values of the conversation partner and the experiences from which those beliefs and values emerge. Curiosity questions offer an opportunity for the other person to tell more of their own story, values, and perspective. With this manner of expressing interest and listening, we validate their worth as a human being.

C is for Connect. Having listened and explored their perspective, we can share our experiences that might resonate with them. It is helpful to point out where we agree. In seeking to connect, it is wise to speak of our personal experience without delving into prejudices or interpretations. If we’ve ever thought like they do, we might share that – without going into how we’ve grown beyond that perspective. We need not worry that while we may agree on one point, it doesn’t mean that we believe everything they say is right. Finding a point of connection and agreement lays another plank in the bridge between us.

E in the RACE method stands for Expand. Having built trust by sharing personal stories, we can raise questions that open possibilities for a broader view. We might ask if it could be possible that another truth could exist alongside the point we have in common. It is what the Canaanite woman did with Jesus. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Was it not possible that the grace of God he proclaims is available to both the Jews and the Gentiles? Could there be another way of looking at this?

Such a conversation may give us an opportunity to expand our thinking as well. If we embark upon dialogue with intentionality, hopefully we will learn something as well. Mark Twain said, “An open mind leaves a chance for someone to drop a worthwhile thought in it.”

The Race Method of dialogue is Reflect. Ask. Connect. Expand. These tools help us open space for dialogue, understanding, growth, and expansion of our mindsets.

I have only recently learned of this RACE method of conversation, but I've practiced and experienced the concepts for many years. As a seminary student, I served an internship in San Francisco in the mid-80's during the AIDS crisis. The organist at the church I served shared with me his personal story as a gay man. Meeting a LGBTQ person was a new experience for me, but Jerry approached it in a way that was respectful of my ignorance. He did not belittle me for my lack of knowledge, but he gently planted seeds of understanding that expanded my worldview. His respectful approach and vulnerability were gifts that expanded my understanding and deepened my compassion. I will be forever grateful for that relationship with Jerry. He prepared me to empathize with and be open to LGBTQ members in churches I have served over the years, and to be accepting without hesitation of beloved family members.

As we seek to cross multiple divides in our nation, our conversations would benefit from active listening, empathy, and personal storytelling. Before we dare to judge or condemn another, we might probe their values and the experiences that brought them to this point. As we intentionally and compassionately lay planks to build a bridge between us, trust grows until we both might be able to expand our perspectives. In our national conversation on racism, we are witnessing how perspectives are changing, the need for repentance is acknowledged, and fences are being moved to be inclusive.

As followers of Christ, may we continue as conversation partners who actively listen and empathize, with the goal of building bridges instead of walls.

ⁱ Erica Etelson, *Beyond Contempt: How Liberals Can Communicate Across the Great Divide* (Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2020), p. 112.

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