



“She Keeps Shouting”
Scripture – Matthew 15:21-28
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, August 16, 2020

One day a mysterious figure shows up in the tiny village of Three Pines — the fictional town at the center of Louise Penny’s series of mystery novels.

At first the villagers are curious about the stranger wearing long, dark robes and a mask that hides the face. But, then, they grow wary. For days — through rain and sleet and icy cold — the mysterious figure stands, unmoving, staring silently ahead.

It turns out the specter on the village green is a *Cobrador*. According to Penny’s research into Spanish tradition, *Cobradors* would turn up from time to time in the mountainous villages of Spain. But their presence was never random; they’d appear when someone in the village had done something wrong — something for which they’d never been held accountable. When this happened, a *Cobrador* would show up and stand, unmoving, in silent witness to the sin committed.

Over time a mythology developed around the *Cobradors*. They became known as a conscience.

As to the *Cobrador's* presence in Three Pines ... Well, the novel’s protagonist puts it this way: “Someone ... had done something so horrific that a conscience had been called.”¹

A conscience can take different forms. A cloaked figure standing in silent witness. A persistent voice in the back of the mind. A tightness in the gut. In today’s passage from the Gospel of Matthew, conscience takes the form of a Canaanite woman.

Jesus is in Gentile territory; he has crossed the border from Galilee into the district of Tyre and Sidon. Right away he encounters the “Other.” A woman — a *foreign* woman — comes out and starts shouting: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon!”

We do not know how this Canaanite woman first got wind of Jesus. Or how she’s found him as he treks through town. We only know that she has already placed her hope in the one who’s been healing lepers and paralytics and demoniacs all over Galilee. So she shouts, “Have mercy on me, Lord!”

This woman is desperate. She has probably tried everything she can think of to help her daughter — from healing balms to pools rumored to cure the sick. I imagine she’s exhausted every option; she’s at the end of her rope. You

¹ Louise Penny, *Glass Houses* (Minotaur Books, 2017), 73.

might know how she feels. At the very least you've probably seen such desperation before: It breeds in medical buildings and hospital wards; in unemployment offices and homeless shelters; in streets filled with protesters who've had enough. It breeds anywhere that suffering people go for help but find their pleas dismissed, their pain minimized, their prayers *un*-answered. Yes, this Canaanite woman is desperate. But she has one, last chance ... Her hope lies in the person who has heard this plea before, "Have mercy, Son of David." And she trusts Jesus will respond as he always has — with compassion. So the Canaanite woman keeps shouting. "Have mercy! Have mercy!"

But Jesus responds only with silence, leaving a void that his disciples fill: "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." It's a response we've seen many times before — the impulse to choose one's own comfort and convenience over compassion and care. "Take your complaint elsewhere. I don't have the time or the energy ... I don't have the resources to help." I can relate to the disciples' desire for Jesus to send her away because, sometimes, I'm guilty of the same response ... It's uncomfortable to be confronted with a stranger's pain.

But the Canaanite woman persists. Even when the disciples try to cast her aside, she will not be dismissed. She kneels before Jesus and pleads, "Lord, help me." And, to our shock and dismay, he replies: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

I don't know what to make of Jesus' response. It makes me squirm. It makes me question the classic claim that Jesus is without sin. It makes me want to offer excuses for his behavior. But, ultimately, I don't think this moment is about Jesus. It's about her — the woman kneeling at Jesus' feet.

She faithfully persists ... even when Jesus — in very *un*-Christ-like fashion — withholds mercy, even when Jesus tells her she's not worthy of compassion. The Canaanite woman persists because she believes God's grace is for her, too.

In this passage she *alone* sees clearly God's vision for creation — a vision in which all are welcomed and made whole. *She* understands that — in God's realm — the circle of compassion includes those who've been pushed to the margins, those whose cries for mercy have fallen on deaf ears. *She* knows that the One who fed thousands on five loaves and two fish — and even had bread to spare! — has at least one morsel of grace to offer her. So the Canaanite woman persists; she calls Jesus back to himself: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

The Canaanite woman persists and Jesus shows mercy. She persists and her daughter is made whole. She persists and Jesus deems her persistence an act of great faith.

And the Canaanite woman persists even now. She keeps shouting from the pages of Scripture, calling those of us who claim Jesus as Lord to draw the circle of compassion wider and wider.

She has a habit of showing up at piercing moments — when those of us with the ability to turn away from desperate neighbors need most to heed their cries for mercy.

The Canaanite woman was calling after us six years ago during the summer of 2014. On August 9 of that year, Michael Brown was gunned down by a white police officer on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri. And eight days later Christians across denominations and across the world turned to *this* story from Matthew, as the Gospel passage set before us by the church's schedule of readings.

Three years later, in August 2017, white supremacists descended upon Charlottesville, Virginia for a rally that turned deadly, as a self-proclaimed neo-Nazi drove his car into a crowd of counter-protesters. The following week

the lectionary commended the Canaanite woman to us once again. And, so, she kept calling after us as our nation reeled from a fresh manifestation of its original sin.

And she's calling now ... during this critical moment when a devastating pandemic, an economic collapse, and the murders of Ahmaud and Breonna and George and Rayshard have laid bare the racial inequities that are baked into the foundations of our country. The Canaanite woman keeps shouting after us: "Have mercy! Have mercy! Have mercy!"

Time and again she appears, as if the Holy Spirit senses that a conscience needs to be summoned.

Like the *Cobrador* that stands, unmoving, in silent witness to a sin committed, the Canaanite woman's presence is unsettling. Her persistent cries force us to confront our impulse to echo the disciples' plea: "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us!" Her persistent cries force those of us insulated by privilege to reckon with our own propensity to turn away — to tune out another's cries for help, to ignore another's pain, to allow injustice to stand.

But, unlike the *Cobrador* — whose only purpose is to hold another to account, the Canaanite woman comes to hold us accountable to God's vision for creation, and to point us toward the Messiah who heals our brokenness. Whereas the *Cobrador* stands immobile, this woman kneels before Jesus — the Giver of Grace, the one who makes *all* of us whole.

A conscience can take different forms ... A cloaked figure standing in silent witness. Or a faithfully persistent woman, calling upon us to draw the circle of compassion ever-wider.

Today our conscience is shouting after us once again. But, as her cries for mercy ring out, I find that I'm hopeful. I'm hopeful because I think the church is listening.

I think the church was listening as our denomination's General Assembly concluded its virtual gathering in June with 8 minutes and 46 seconds of silence. Eight minutes and 46 seconds to mark the amount of time a police officer put his knee to the neck of George Floyd; 8 minutes and 46 seconds for the General Assembly to renew their resolve "to live out the justice of God's kin-dom."²

I think the church is listening and the Spirit is moving every time another community of faith answers the call to radical and fearless discipleship. There are now over 500 congregations across the Presbyterian Church who have signed on to our denomination's Matthew 25 Initiative. This means that over 500 congregations have committed themselves anew to the work of eradicating systemic poverty and dismantling structural racism. This means that over 500 communities just might find that the circle drawn by their hearts grows wider and wider.³

I think the church is listening as *we* — right here at Westminster — are holding fast to God's vision for creation. With the leadership of our Peace & Justice Work Group, we are learning more about the injustice that plagues our common life, we are striving to respond to others' cries for mercy, and we are seeking healing for our community's brokenness. And, by God's grace, we will continue to lay claim to the promise that God's grace is for all.

Yes, the Canaanite woman keeps shouting after us. Our conscience keeps shouting after us. Holding us to our calling as followers of Jesus Christ. May our hearts be open to her cries, drawing the circle of compassion wider and wider until all are welcomed and made whole by the love and grace of God.

² Mike Ferguson, "Eight minutes, 46 seconds of silence" (Presbyterian News Service, June 27, 2020).

³ Melody K. Smith, "Matthew 25 vision passes 500th milestone" (Presbyterian News Service, June 23, 2020).

Prayers of the People ~ Chesna Hinkley

Almighty and most gracious God,

You have filled the universe with good things. You have made all things, sustained all things, redeemed all things. You are renewing all things. We praise you that you have created us in your image and that even though we were disobedient, we have received mercy, and you are recreating us in the image of your risen Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We proclaim your mighty acts, you who called us out of darkness and into your marvelous light. To you, O Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and power, now and in all ages.

We come to you, Lord, with so many different feelings and desires and fears. We don't always have the courage to believe. We feel guilt and fear for our questions instead of seeking your face in the confusion. We explain away our doubts and our anger instead of trusting that you can handle them. In this time of global anxiety, we ask your mercy on us, that you would see on this earth your people, who are called by your name, and meet us where we are. And in our private hearts, be present with us as one who knows each passing thought and sees each insecurity, who understands our inmost selves with clarity, grace, and the power to heal.

Teach us, merciful God, that you are enough for us. Few things are necessary; let us choose the best and contemplate your beauty. Our constant work and worrying and movement cannot make us any more beloved, cannot heal our souls, cannot convince you or ourselves that we deserve this relationship of affection and nurture that you sustain with us. And yet you have called us worthy, you have come among us and assumed our human nature, you have shown us what it is to be joined to our Creator in harmony, you have reconciled us, you have made us agents of your work.

In that work, God, make us diligent. Make us faithful and give us courage. Walk with us when we are rejected and spur us on to higher goals than being well-liked. Instill in us hope in your reconciling and resurrecting work and hold on to us when we cannot hold on to you. Make us instruments of peace, agents of justice, proclaimers of your reign, and defenders of hope. Have mercy on your world, O Worker of Miracles, and teach us to have mercy on it too.

In justice, O Lord, you have justified, and by grace you have adopted us as your children. You sustain in this moment the very atoms of creation and the very laws of physics, and nothing stands except by your knowledge and will. Great God, in all things you are working for the good of those who love you and keep your commandments and so we trust in you, the ground of our being and the Lord of all creation. We lay all our questions and our longings, our mistakes and our triumphs at the feet of our only hope in life and in death, Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray, saying,

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.