

**August 20, 2023**  
**Matthew 15:21-28**  
**The Gift of Inclusion**  
**Michael Stanfield**

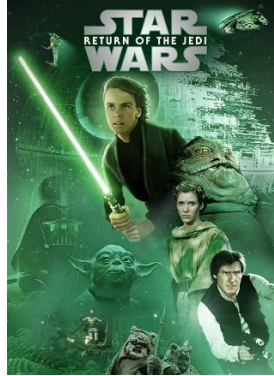
Jesus left that place (his homeland) and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after 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. *Words from God, for the people of God. Let us pray. Gracious God, bless us as we come to your word that we may approach it with fresh eyes, open hearts, and willing spirits. In Christ's name we pray, amen.*



How many of you are fans of the Star Wars films and universe? Most of you I suspect. How many of you have *been* avid fans from the very beginning? I was *very* slow to come around. There is something in me, to this day, that remains greatly suspicious about anything that has instant mass appeal. The original Star Wars movie was no exception. It debuted in May of 1977. I was 15 years old at the time and although every one of my friends told me I had to go because I would love it, I stubbornly held out until it finally became a kind of banner: I was the only one when I began my 10<sup>th</sup> grade year who had not seen it.

It wasn't until the summer of 1978 that I saw it for the first time at a drive in. And I must admit that all I remember is how bad I thought the acting and the special effects were. Of course, it didn't help that I saw it at a drive-in since drive-ins are designed for the social aspect of going out and not for top notch viewing pleasure.

At any rate, it was enough to keep me from seeing the second or third films in the original trilogy at the theater as well, instead watching them much later when they came out on video. It was only as I got older that I began to appreciate the psychological and spiritual themes lifted up in the films.



For instance, there's a line in *Return of the Jedi* that has always struck me as particularly insightful, especially considering its inclusion in a movie filled with a two-ton slug-shaped bounty hunter and a planet full of fighting teddy bears.

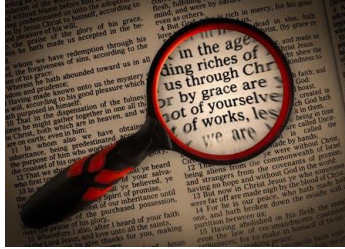


In a conversation with the ghost of his former mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi, newly-minted Jedi knight Luke Skywalker asks his sensei if Darth Vader is indeed his father. When Obi-Wan confirms the awful truth, Luke asks why his teacher had formerly lied to him, telling him instead that Darth Vader “betrayed and murdered (his) father.”

“What I told you was true,” Kenobi calmly replies, “from a certain point of view.” The point of view that Obi Wan was talking about was a spiritual one rather than a literal one. From a spiritual point of view, Darth Vader, the inner evil one, killed and devoured Luke’s father, Anakin, the gifted but very human *man* that Obi Wan once knew.

But Luke is not buying it. Incredulous, he balks at this assertion and wonders aloud how his mentor can claim such a relativistic stance on what is, in his mind, clearly a black-and-white issue.

With a mixture of Zen wisdom and Jewish midrash, Kenobi explains to his pupil, “Luke, you’re going to find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view.” Simon Ringsmuth, “Examples of Perspective Change for More Dynamic Images,” *Digital Photography School Website*, digital-photography-school.com. Retrieved January 20, 2017.



Indeed. And nowhere is this more true than in the interpretation of scripture. Take our morning text, for example. The way *it* gets interpreted depends entirely on how you understand the humanity and divinity of Jesus.



For example, do we appreciate that the Christmas babe on Mary's knee was a real, live, human baby?



Or was he, as some of the medieval painters depicted him, a miniature adult?

Was Jesus born already consciously programmed with every word he was ever to speak, every step he was to take, and did he therefore have no need of growth such as real humans experience? Or is the apostle Luke truthful when he reports that the young Jesus "increased in wisdom" (Luke 2:52)?



If you have always assumed that Jesus had full, divine knowledge from birth, I am asking you, as Obi Wan asked Luke Skywalker, to look at the truth of Jesus from a different point of view.



Assume that Jesus isn't teasing or playing games with the Canaanite woman whose daughter is in torment. Assume that when Jesus says to her in verse 24, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," he speaks his genuine belief; and likewise, when he says in verse 26, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'.

In that case, the Canaanite woman's clever, shrewdly humorous retort as a marginalized person, "even the dogs eat the crumbs," acts as a catalyst, inspiring Jesus to lift his eyes beyond the walls of just "the house of Israel."

Taking the doctrine of the Incarnation seriously, we then may find this Scripture passage portraying Jesus as fully human but as having a crucial moment of divine insight into the heart of God – of himself suddenly seeing things from a "different point of view" – that of this marginalized Canaanite woman who inadvertently invites him into the inexorable logic that flows from the premise of monotheism: If there is one God, then that God must be the God for everyone. Quite possibly this Scripture passage takes us into that marvelous moment when this logic crystallizes in the mind of our Master.

There is ample evidence that Jesus did arrive at and teach an inclusive gospel. In, fact, it could be said that this is one of the main charges laid against him by the Pharisees. But what if Jesus came to this divine insight only by way of significant contact with one, even he had previously been indoctrinated to believe was less than worthy? What if Jesus' full acceptance and understanding of his mission came from direct meaningful contact with those that his religious tradition had always insisted were outsiders?

The implication for us then becomes rather pointed: There are some words of God we cannot hear *except* by way of significant contact with those we have been indoctrinated by our culture to

believe are outsiders: the poor, immigrants, people of color, those in prison, those with handicaps, those who identify as anything but heterosexual.



On my parent’s 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, they took my three siblings, myself, our spouses and all of our children on a cruise to the Bahamas. It was a glorious trip that none of us will ever forget. When we got to the Bahamas, several of us went ashore to explore.

I remember walking behind a man from the ship through Freeport. Wearing orange pants and a brown and white checkered jacket, he was puffing on a fat cigar and smelled like Old Spice. As I walked behind him, not being able to help but overhear, the man with the cigar seemed to comment on everything. “Look,” he said, “it must be nice to sit around and eat mangos all day.” After another distance he said, “Look at that! Why don’t these Bahama people mow their lawns.” Then he pointed to another group of people saying, “Look at that! All these people do is sit around and sell t-shirts.” I began to wonder why the man had not remained at home in the United States. Then it occurred to me that he had *not* ever left home – not really. He had brought his home with him with all of its biases, prejudices and boundaries. They were so thick as to be impenetrable and he was completely unaware of them.



Our morning text begins by making it clear just where Jesus was. *He* was standing on Canaanite soil. *He* was a foreigner *in* a foreign land. Jesus, it would seem, no less than us, carried *his* country, with all *its* biases and boundaries with *him*. But the difference was that this very human part of Jesus was open to divine insight coming even from beyond those original boundaries.



We all treat others as if the point of view we have inherited from the culture, family and religion in which have been reared, gives us exclusive access to God and therefore a license to scrutinize others.



But the reality is that God’s Truth is a treacherous mountain we must climb throughout our lives. It is a journey for which safe passage can be achieved *only* when we defer at crucial junctures to those we may previously have marginalized. We are at that juncture now – not just individually but as a human race.

We can ill-afford this unconscious judgement and marginalization of others from a previously held privileged point of view...



In fact, we would do well to remember at this juncture that a distinctive characteristic of worship and hospitality in first century Christian churches was the inclusion of believers from different political, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. In a fractured first-century society, these followers of Christ were trying to create uncommon Christian communities that embraced *all* people with God’s love and grace.

Since members of the church believed that God had “broken down the dividing wall,” that is, the hostility between Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:14), they expressed respect and recognition for Christians of different backgrounds through the practice of hospitality and shared meals that helped people to see themselves as brothers and sisters at the table of God. ...

But, of course, not every community lived up to this ideal. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul complains about “divisions” and “factions” at the Lord’s supper (11:18, 19), and James warns against making “distinctions” between the rich and the poor in the community of faith, giving seats to the rich while forcing the poor to stand (James 2:1–7). Henry G. Brinton, *The Welcoming Congregation: Roots and Fruits of Christian Hospitality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012).

But Paul was clear: Those whom Christ welcomes, we must not exclude. Those whom Christ forgives, we must not condemn. Those whom Christ helps, we must not fail.



Joan Chittister is a Benedictine nun, activist and writer. In one of her articles, she reminds us that in ancient times, to be a Christian community meant to defy the Roman government, to stretch the boundaries of Judaism, and to counter pagan values with Christian ones. Real discipleship meant taking difficult actions: the rejecting of emperor worship and the Roman class system, the forswearing of animal sacrifice, the inclusion of Gentiles, the elimination of dietary laws, the acceptance of women and the supplanting of law with love, of nationalism with universalism.

For Chittister, being disciples in the world today implies a commitment to be in *our* world what Jesus was in *his*: healer and prophet, voice and heart, call and sign of the God whose design for this world is a justice and a love that stretches boundaries. It infers, implies, and requires of us the confirming love Jesus had for everyone, everywhere — regardless of who might try to draw limits around the love of God.

Being a disciple means working to make life better for others, going beyond our lives to improve the lives of others. “To follow Jesus is to follow one who turns the world upside down,” Jeanne Morales, “The cost of discipleship,” *St. Joan of Arc Web Site*, Lenten Season 2003, Stjoan.com. This piece draws on and quotes from Joan Chittister’s speech “Discipleship for a Priestly People in a Priestless Period” from the Conference on Women’s Ordination, Dublin 2001.



Several years ago, Franciscan Monk, Robert Karris authored a book entitled “Jesus and the Marginalized in John’s Gospel” (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990). In it, Karris suggests that the Gospel of John was written out of a particular community crisis. John’s community was being threatened with expulsion from the synagogue because Jesus’ broadened view of “chosenness” called into question the unique relationship of the Jewish people to God.

“I maintain,” writes Karris, “that the religious leaders oppose the Christians of John’s community because they perceive them as watering down the standards of being God’s chosen by bringing into their communion Samaritans and Galileans, the physically incapacitated, the ‘people of the land,’ people who are ignorant of the law” (105).

Karris continues: “...the question of the nature of Jesus’ Messiahship was crucial for the evangelist and his community,” because Jesus, he writes, was an ‘inclusive Messiah,’ one who came for the marginalized. And being such a Messiah, he caused the sacred notion of ‘chosen-

ness', held by religious leaders of his day, to totter and crash to the ground. Jesus' followers were in fact 'put out of the synagogue' for confessing Jesus as this all-embracing Messiah" (107).

So, there is always a price to pay for inclusion. The Presbyterian denomination has certainly paid for it in its full inclusion of LGBTQ persons. Inclusion is never easy and causes difficulties for communities. But consider the alternative which is what we have so much of today – enclaves of people who, for the most part, look alike and think alike, and believe alike and all tend to be suspicious, if not outright antagonistic toward outsiders.

And reaching out to those we tend to marginalize needs to be more than an act of charity that allows me to feel good about myself when all I have really done is made the other feel patronized, belittled and used. In fact, our passage today turns the notion of charity on its head. We reach out to the marginalized not because *they* need something *we* have but because *they* have something *we* need: an attitude adjustment. As long as we understand any group of people as being broken and therefore as less than us as human beings, then it is we who are the broken ones. In fact, the very act of continued marginalization is a danger to all of life and all of God's creation.

An example of this comes to us from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.



The Church in Europe decided that cats were "ambassadors of the devil." (Witches, of course, were supposed to favor them.) And so, the Church actually initiated a campaign to eradicate felines from the face of the earth. For two centuries cats were beaten and burned to death. And if a cat owner refused to cooperate with the ban, said owner was assumed to be a witch subject to being burned at the stake!

Well, the pet pogrom was a success. Consequently, with Europe's cat population all but wiped out, the rat population thrived. And so did their fleas which as we know resulted finally in the ravages of Bubonic Plague. Some three-fourths of the human population of England and Europe died.

Human beings of all different stripes, no less than cats, are part of God's world. Far from simply being the "Christian thing" to do, valuing those of different stripes may have far reaching consequences. As it turns out, we need all kinds of folks in ways we cannot yet fathom.



Our boundaries are always being challenged and stretched by God. We, like our master, need to be open to how. Because those who are “in” at one time can later find themselves outside the boundaries, and those outside the boundaries of acceptance can later find themselves inside the boundaries.

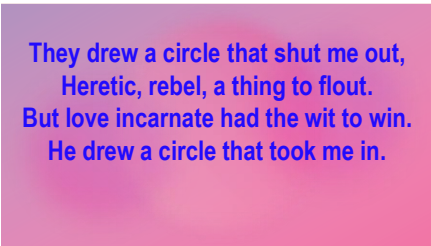
Winston Churchill, whose speeches, many historians credit with saving the free world from Nazi fascism, was kicked out of three schools, had a speech impediment and was told by his mother that he would never amount to much.

The creator of Charlie Brown and the Peanuts, Charles Schultz was a diagnosed major depressive.

Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald and Oprah Winfree were just another bunch of sexually abused unloved black girls.

Richard Prior and Ellen Degeneres were just a couple of outcasts who used humor to keep people at a distance – Prior because he was fearful of what white people might do to him as a black man and Degeneres because she was fearful of what people might do to her if they knew she were a lesbian.

It makes me wonder, how many more people who are just as gifted, but remain so marginalized as to never have their talents and contributions see the light of day. Jesus calls us to draw our boundaries wide enough to include everyone as one anonymous written poem proclaims:



They drew a circle that shut me out,  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love incarnate had the wit to win.  
He drew a circle that took me in.

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As the church, we are that love incarnate – Christ’s body – in our world today. And as I look around, we have a lot of work to do.

Let us pray. Oh, gracious and inclusive Lord, as your heart was opened anew by the Canaanite woman, open our hearts by giving us the courage to reach out and become friends with those we tend to judge as being on your outside lest we become outsiders to you ourselves.