

ONE BODY MANY MEMBERS

Part 2: Meeting Our Neighbors Again for the First Time Bible Studies Bible Study #1: Who is a Canaanite?

Please discuss the following questions in your groups (15 minutes):

1. Does your congregation reflect the racial ethnic/cultural/ economic make-up of your city/town? Is your neighborhood an enclave of exclusivism or inclusivism? Who are the Canaanites in your communities? Is there any way for your congregation to mingle regularly with other racial/ethnic/cultural/economic class groups in your city/town? What are or would be the obstacles? How comfortable would you and the congregation be in crossing racial/ethnic/cultural/economic lines and mingling with those who are different than you in significant sharing faith-based events?

Looking at yourself and your family, both your ancestors who preceded you and your children and grandchildren who will continue after you: are you/they of a pure race/ethnic/culture/economic class or are you/they of mixed blood/class?

What is your mix? What is the mix of the young ones in your family? How many young people and children do you know who are "mixed?"

What will happen with all our "mixed" children?

Where will they feel comfortable? Where will they find home? Could they find themselves at home in your congregation?

3. Are you of Jewish ancestry as Jesus and the first disciples, or did the Christian faith come to you because Jesus' disciples obeyed Jesus' mandate given to them (and to us!) at the end of Matthew's gospel (Matt. 28:19): "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit?" How ready are the disciples in your congregation, including yourself, to go befriend people of another race/ethnicity/

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Read Matthew 15: 21-28

(a volunteer reads; all follow along in their own Bibles).

Leader asks for a few short "gut reactions" from the reading. All listen to the variety of reactions without comments or evaluations (5 minutes).

Leader divides the group into smaller groups of five to six members, and distributes the following reflection. The reflection is to be read aloud by a volunteer in each group while the rest of the group follows along on their individual reflection handouts.

Reflection by an ELCA member
(5 minutes to read):

This text elicits some reactions from many who read it. As an ELCA member and as a person of color, this text causes some reactions in me too. I, first of all, feel for the Canaanite woman in the text. It was not easy for her to get Jesus' attention. She "keeps shouting" after Jesus' disciples until they are annoyed at her. She physically makes her way in front of Jesus, kneels down in front of him, and moreover, asks him with a faith that Jesus himself recognizes, for a miracle of healing for her daughter. It was not easy . . . even Jesus had not welcomed her initially. Only her persistent faith carried her through her struggle to be included.

A "Canaanite"-- what is that? In Jesus' time the Canaanites were not liked by the Jews. They had been the inhabitants of the land that the Jews called home. The Canaanites were then the foreigners, the "others" that the Jews avoided. Anybody can be seen and treated and ignored today just like a Canaanite depending on the context. In other words, being or not being a Canaanite is relative to each context. I'll share with you my own story. I am Cuban-born. I lived in Cuba for the first fifteen years of my life. I was born and grew up in an upper middle class family who taught me both implicitly and explicitly that I was "white." In my veins, I was taught, ran only white European (Spanish) blood. My blood was not mixed with any other "color" blood. Those in my middle class community, church, school, called others "personas de color," literally: "people of color." We were white, they were not. They, the people of color, were the Canaanites for me and for my middle class community in Cuba. A funny thing happened, though. Due to political reasons, my family crossed the ninety miles of the Florida Strait on a boat

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culture/economic class and share faith stories with them, listening to theirs as well as telling your own?

Leader will have each group briefly share their collective or individual answers to one of the questions (5 minutes).

and landed in Key West in 1965. All of a sudden, I and my white Cuban family instantaneously became “people of color” on October 21, 1965. Still to this day some elders in my family cannot stand to be called “persons of color.” You see, the persons of color in Cuba were the “others,” the ones that were not as good and perfect as we were in Cuba with our white skin and our nice material means. They, the people of color in Cuba, were poorer, were less educated, they had more children, they didn’t look so nicely groomed as we were, their houses were not as nice, and they spent a lot of time socializing in public. We whites in Cuba saw them everywhere, but had our own private schools, our own neighborhoods, even our own better looking churches. No wonder the older generation in my family refuses to accept their new designation “of color” in this country! You see, the racial/economic class group that my family belonged to had named the Canaanites in Cuba, we knew who they were, and they were not us. And now ninety miles to the north, other “white” people designate us as the “persons of color.” We had decided who were the Canaanites for us in Cuba . . . and yes, it is hard to have others decide that we are now the Canaanites who are not included. We are not excluded by

law (not after the Civil Rights movement), but we are as a fact still excluded from many places. Aside from a few exceptions, many of the communities and institutions in the U.S., including and especially our churches, are still separated through economic, and racial lines. In the U.S., as well as in Cuba when I was there, as in other countries, the so called “people of color” are the Canaanites of our text. Being “of color,” being considered a Canaanite, is completely relative to the context. It’s completely relative to the power dynamics in each context. You change contexts, as happened to my family and me, you can find yourself being designated either “white” or “of color;” you may find yourself in the dominant economic/cultural class or lumped in with the Canaanites. Our church, the ELCA, is predominantly white in the U.S.

Continue to: Bible Study #2: Why Change?



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ONE BODY MANY MEMBERS

Part 2: Meeting Our Neighbors Again for the First Time Bible Studies Bible Study #2: Why Change?

Please respond to the following questions (15 minutes):

1. Why are you a Lutheran Christian? What would you tell other Christians about your faith as a Lutheran?

Do you think our specific theological emphasis in the Lutheran church is worth sharing with other people of Christian faith? If you think it is worth it, why is it? 2. Can you think of some ways in which your congregation might be ignoring or neglecting your neighbors of other races/ethnicities/cultures/economic classes, a.k.a. the Canaanites in your city/town? What are some first thoughts you might have about changes that could be done and first step that could be taken in order to become a more diverse congregation in terms of race/ethnicity/culture/economic class? Who do you think could help your congregation build bridges with other racial/ethnic/cultural/economic class groups? Has anyone in your Bible study group ever been in a situation where a new structure for sharing power was called for in a group, and was it or was it not successful?

3. What do you think Jesus' disciples thought when Jesus finally accepted the Canaanite woman and granted her request? Do you think they felt that Jesus was really throwing the children's food to the dogs? Or do you think that they rejoiced in considering themselves and the Gentile woman as brothers and sisters under the same Lord? Do you anticipate some feelings of discomfort in your congregation as efforts to create new multicultural worship

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Leader has small groups (5 to 6 persons) read Matthew 15:21-28 again, and distributes the following reflection. A volunteer in each group reads it aloud, while others follow on their reflection handouts (10 minutes).

Reflection

Jesus did not welcome the Canaanite woman--three times! First, he did not answer her. Then, he said to his disciples that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And then, even after she knelt in front of him and directly asked him for help, he still told her that it was not fair to throw to the dogs the children's food, implying that she was not one of his children. Only after Jesus recognized a great faith in her, only after recognizing that she indeed counted herself as one who had faith in him, did he grant her her request, and healed her daughter.

This Canaanite woman changed Jesus' mind with her persistent cries for inclusivity. "I am worth your attention, Jesus," she seemed to demand. "I believe in you, and because of that, I can persist in addressing you and asking for help, because I know whom I am addressing," she could have been thinking. Most people of color, the Canaanites in this country, are people of faith. Their deep faith has come to them from multiple generations, and for very many of them, Jesus Christ is their Lord and Savior. Their faith is a great faith. But many persons of color and of faith are unchurched for a myriad of reasons. Certainly, many persons of color and of faith have not heard the liberating emphasis on grace, and not on works, of the Lutheran church. We Lutheran Christians in the ELCA are called to share that liberating and healing message with all peoples in the United States. I, a person of color and of faith, am a Lutheran Christian because I am a sinner and I rejoice in the particular emphasis of the Lutheran church that reassures me, that believes with me, that God's grace through faith is my salvation. I am Lutheran because even if I keep messing up, the sheer love of God saves me from my sins. I am Lutheran because Jesus Christ's death on the cross freed me from my enslavement to sin. I am Lutheran because I can freely respond to God's love in Jesus Christ. The ELCA persists in calling for the inclusion of more people of color in our congregations because that

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traditions begin and new dynamics occur in the power structure of the congregation? If you were in the position of having the responsibility to respond to congregational members that were afraid of change, what would you start by telling them about why the congregation is called to change?

Leader asks for brief comments on one question from each of the groups (5 minutes).

Lutheran message is worth sharing with all people, with “all nations.”

To cry for inclusion is to cry for change. Jesus’ reversal with the Canaanite woman may inspire us to change. Our congregations will have some changes to make so as to include many who are not included now, to welcome many that do not feel at home in the cultural/economic environment of the majority of ELCA congregations. Our congregations as a rule feel very “homey” to the ethnic groups that set them up in this country, but not so homey for others, especially new immigrant groups; Latinos and Asian Americans (newly arrived or with roots in U.S. land for generations); African Americans and others who have been here for a long, long time; and those not belonging to the same middle class or upper middle class of which most of our congregations are composed.

If the food of the gospel with its Lutheran emphasis on liberating and healing grace is going to be shared with more children in the U.S., we will need to pray and work

towards finding local, contextual ways of including all in our flocks. It will be hard, as it was for the Canaanite woman. It will require change, as with Jesus’ own reversal, to step out of the mission to particular Northern European ethnic groups and to a particular economic class and to struggle with diverse ways of doing things. It will require the courage to let go of the dominant position that makes us so sure that our way is the good way for all peoples, and all that others have to do is to accept our invitation to come join us and our ways. It will require wisdom and humility to listen, to learn to listen to others, and not think that we would know what they all need, and how they need it. It will require immense sacrifice on each of our parts to share smaller doses of our precious worship traditions with others’ precious worship traditions—to give as well as to receive the blessings passed on by faith ancestors of all of our diverse cultural groups. Most of all, however, it will require persistence, like that of the Canaanite woman, to keep trying different ways of stepping out and meeting and getting to know our diverse neighbors’ circumstances, histories, struggles, and hopes.

Continue to: Bible Study #3: Let us Pray



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Leader asks each small group to write a short prayer to share with the whole large group as closure for the Bible study series on Matthew 15: 21-28 (15 minutes for writing and sharing each of the groups' prayers). Suggestion: the prayers may also be made part of the Prayers of the People on Sunday mornings.

Leader reads Matt. 15: 21-28 aloud and asks participants to briefly share with the group:

1. times in their lives when their faith have sustained their hopes
2. their hopes for their congregation's future.

Again, the purpose is to listen to one another, not to correct anyone (10 minutes).

Leader divides the participants again in small groups and distributes the following reflection (5 minutes to read).

Reflection

Faith seems to have made all the difference for the Canaanite woman. She steps out of the comfort zone of her own people and runs after a Jewish Rabbi, whom she calls "Lord, Son of David," and kneeling faithfully in front of him asks him for help. She talks to him again when he tells her that it is not fair to give her the children's food. She reaffirms her faith by telling Jesus that Canaanites (the dogs) can eat the same food of the master at the same time as the Jews (the children). Jesus listens. Jesus agrees. Jesus heals her daughter.

Faith empowered the Canaanite woman to approach the one whom she recognized as her Lord, the one in front of whom she knelt, the one on whom she laid her heart—a mother's heart—and her hopes for the healing of her daughter. When we lay our hopes on our Lord, and when we prayerfully approach our God in prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, our prayers will be heard. Even if we are Canaanites who cannot heal ourselves and our children, God will hear our prayers. As we hope to change our congregational culture, as we hope to see a multicultural congregation eating together our Lord's healing food, we may easily realize that the change is going to be difficult and will require much persistence. Let us ask God through Jesus Christ to sustain our hopes through the difficulties we will face again and again as we begin our efforts toward increased inclusivity in our church. Sometimes the difficulties will come from ourselves, individually and communally. Sometimes we will encounter the difficulties in our attempts to establish dialogue with others. Sometimes we will be ignored, discouraged, or plain rejected, as the Canaanite woman was. Old wounds, old suspicions, old prejudices may threaten our efforts again and again from within and from without. Even while conquering the inner obstacles, the concrete tasks of bridge building may seem overwhelming at times. The time to build bridges and cross them back and forth will be

long and we will need to keep our faithful focus and energy. As we dream and plan for a church that is for all people we will need to persistently ask God for help. Our healing, and the healing of our neighbors of different races/ethnicities/cultures/economic classes, is the miracle we may ask for from our Lord.

Bible Studies Completed - Continue to Going Deeper



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