

Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Sunday, 9 September 2018

“Jesus Responds, ‘Touché’”

Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 35:4-7a
Christian Scripture: Mark 7:24-37



How many of you ever ‘limbo-ed’? You know ‘limbo’, right?

Two people hold a stick or rod and participants (usually in some kind of Conga Line, Mary plays the Conga Line tune on the organ!)



must lean back, demonstrating their strength and flexibility by passing under the rod without touching it. This morning, I am going to ask you, ‘How low can you go?’

I am *not* speaking physically. I am speaking theologically. I am speaking Christologically. ‘How low can you go?’

So, if any of you have a pen and paper, now might be a good time to take notes. What do I mean when I ask you, ‘How low can you go’? Well, some of us have what theologians refer to as a ‘high’ Christology, that is our concept or understanding of Jesus is that he is divine, that Jesus is, well, God. And some of us have a Christology that is ‘low’, that is, our concept or understanding of Jesus is that he is human. Now, some of us switch back and forth depending on the story. Sometimes Jesus is *more* human and *less* God when he says, for example, on the cross, “I thirst”. Sometimes Jesus is *more* God and *less* human when, for example, he walks on water. Christian orthodoxy gives us another alternative: Jesus was both fully human *and* fully God.

So, ‘How low can you go?’, to what degree can you understand Jesus to be more human, like you and I?



Today’s scripture has to be one of my favourite of all time. Why? Because it is scandal! The fact that the story is included in the

scriptures is incredible because it is a scandal and biblical scholars tell us that anything that is embarrassing or difficult to explain almost has to be historically accurate because no writer would intentionally envision a scandal and insert a problem into scripture (Jesus being baptised by John is good example of this). Also, I like it because I am a bit of a feminist. I love it when the women in the Bible make fools of the men - which was most of the time.

This scripture is one of my favourites because it is story about when Jesus was 'best-ed' in an argument. Jesus loses an argument. It may be the only argument he loses in the whole of scripture. And, he loses bad. He is roasted. And more than that, he loses an argument to *a woman*. More than that, he loses to a lay person, for he was a *rabbi*. And more than that, a Canaanite, a Gentile, beats him in an argument. I absolutely love it! Now, no disrespect to Jesus, I love Jesus. But, sometimes you have to root for the underdog, pardon the pun. And the underdog in this story is a Gentile woman who contests Jesus and in the end out-debates him.

So, 'How low can you go?'

Let's hear the story - but let us hear it 'Scott' style: Jesus is tired of people. He exhausted. They are hounding him. The suffering of the people under poverty, Roman occupation and

religious tyranny is never-ending. Jesus hides himself away in an effort to avoid everyone. And then, when he's resting, someone sneaks-in. She heard about him. She's desperate. Ain't nothin' gonna stop this woman. Why? Her daughter is sick. This mother will do anything. And hell hath no fury like a desperate mother. Am I right?

The Bible doesn't say it, but if Jesus is human, you can sense his anger; you feel his impatience. He's at the end of his rope. He doesn't want to see anyone. He is finished. But, she falls at his feet. And she begs him to heal her daughter. 'How low can you go?'

And Jesus, incredibly, seems to have no sympathy. He seems to have little compassion and he does the unthinkable. He says "No". And worse, he calls her and her daughter "dogs". 'How low can you go?'

Now, if we believe that Jesus was fully God, then we have no problem that Jesus can walk on water. And if we believe that Jesus was fully human, then we should have no problem that Jesus can be frustrated, grouchy and even rude. No? How many of you here, who are human, have never been frustrated, grouchy or rude? Well, it makes a great deal of sense that Jesus may have been at times as well. So, 'How low can you go?'

Could Jesus have been racist? Could Jesus have been arrogant?
Could Jesus have been ignorant of the extent to his true calling up
until this time? 'How low can you go?'

At this point, it is important to listen a bit to Matthew's account of the same story. In Matthew, Jesus is portrayed worse than he is in Mark. In Matthew, the woman cries, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David'! And Jesus ignores her! Then the woman keeps pestering and keeps shouting at Jesus. What extreme impertinence! Jesus says to her, that he 'has come *only* to save the Jews, his own people, the people of the Covenant. The Abrahamic people. Everybody else, all other races except the Jews, all Gentiles, they are dogs. And this woman and her daughter are dogs. Jesus in effect tells her that he has only enough energy to save his own. (Sounds like 'America First', no?) Jesus tells her that he can not take food from his own children and give it to the dogs. The woman then responds ... can you imagine the incredible cheek of this woman? She knows who he is, she calls him 'Lord', and she says to her Lord, 'Yes, but even my daughter and I deserve the crumbs from your table'.

What incredible courage. What incredible bravery. What incredible fortitude. This is the strength I could only expect from a mother, and a damn smart one! ‘How low can you go?’

She tells her Lord, ‘You don’t even know how great you are’. ‘You don’t even know your true calling’. ‘You don’t know that God loves me as much as you and your children’. And she says, ‘Let me tell you something, Lord. *You* are the Saviour of the universe. *You* are the healer of all nations. *You* do not discriminate between male and female. Rich or poor. Old or young. *You* do not distinguish between Jew and Gentile. *You* came to save the tax collector as well as the priest. *You* are for the orphan and widow as much as *you* are for the rich young prince’. And she tells the Lord, ‘Live out your true calling, and you can start with my daughter’. And she drops the mic. ‘How low can you go?’

To this, Jesus responds, ‘Touché’. Jesus immediately concedes. He says, ‘Woman, you are right. I am wrong.’ He says in Mark, “For saying that, you may go’ (Mark 7:29). Matthew’s account has Jesus going further and saying, “Woman, great is your faith (Matthew 15:28)!”

Friends in Christ, we live in a frightening time when the words on the Statue of Liberty that say, “Give me your tired, your poor,

Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" scarcely means anything anymore.¹ Quite frankly, I do not know why the United States government hasn't torn down the Statue of Liberty all-together.

We also live in a context when I because of my relative wealth, because of my education, because of white-male-privilege, I often see those on the streets of Brattleboro as 'the other'. Brattleboro has many addicts. Many who are mentally-ill. Many who panhandle. Many who live in tents in the woods. I must confess to you my false sense of scarcity that prohibits me from having a generous spirit. I say 'me first'. I say 'my children first'. I am human. And I sin. Friends, I believe it is in community that I can come to repent and reform. I believe that through hearing the wisdom and seeing the example of all of you can inspire me to greater faithfulness.

So, 'how low can you go'? If you went all the way to the bottom with me this morning, take heart. The end of the story is thus: Jesus tells the Syrophenician "Woman, let it be done for you as you wish" and her daughter was healed.

¹ "The New Colossus", The Statue of Liberty, National Monument, New York. <https://www.nps.gov/stli/learn/historyculture/colossus.htm>, accessed 8 September 2018.

So, we can end this message by asking, 'How *high* can you go?'

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded: 'Amen'!