

Over the past week I have been reading a novel about a group of young people with special powers – the only problem is that the adults around them are unsure whether they have enough maturity to use these powers for good. They are full of energy and impulsive, and respond quickly to dangerous situations without thinking through the consequences. This is both their gift and their weakness in a sense – and through a series of bizarre and complex situations, this story plays out.

This is often the question in coming of age novels – the question of who has power and wisdom, and who can use it. They play with the notion of who is right and what is right. A very difficult concept, and one that as we get older we might contemplate whether there is definitive answer to.

It is this question of ‘right’ or ‘good’ which is at the heart of some of the readings we have heard this morning. The first 8 verses of Isaiah radically expands the boundaries for being included among God’s people.

This book was written at a late stage in the development of the book of Isaiah, the text incorporates claims in the book about human action and divine action. The text is reflecting an ongoing disagreement about how the post-exilic Jewish community should define itself, it invites us to consider the lines we draw that exclude or include persons in our communities¹.

It does this in a way that invites the reader to consider the notion of human action and divine action. The Hebrew word *tsedeq/tsedaqah*, which is normally translated “righteousness,” appears twice in Isaiah 56:1. The first time, it refers to proper human behaviour: “do what is right.” The second time, it refers to divine liberation “my deliverance (will) be revealed.” The Hebrew word can mean both, because its range of meaning includes the state of being right and the result of right action. It’s difficult to capture these nuances with a single word in other languages, so many translations don’t reproduce the repetition in the verse.

Theologian Blake Couey asserts that *the book of Isaiah makes an important theological claim about the relationship between human and divine action. On the one hand, God acts for good in the world even when humans fail to do what’s right. God delivers the exiles from Babylon despite their moral shortcomings. On the other hand, the expectation for divine action should motivate efforts to establish a more righteous social order. The imminence of “my salvation” encourages and empowers God’s people to “maintain justice and do what is right”*².

It is an interesting question as we are confronted by the current global pandemic and related social crisis. On the one hand we long to see visible signs of God’s action in the world; at the same time we are confronted by,

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4559

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4559

and indeed should be motivated by the desire to promote and maintain justice and do what is right!

But what is right?

Is it returning to normal knowing that some will still die as a result of being in contact with others? Is it staying locked down in parts knowing that people will lose their jobs, their livelihoods, and their purpose? And how do we make these decisions from a place of wealth and power, when we are the least likely to be affected; when those who are most affected have less voice in the decision making about such things?

To be and do what is right is a difficult thing! It requires that we acknowledge the power we have and use it wisely.

Power, and the perception of the use of power, is one of the very issues which Jesus was trying to confront as he teaches about how the kingdom of God should be. And it relates the first theme of Isaiah human action and divine action, and what inclusion means.

Having said this, the encounter we hear recorded from Matthew's Gospel today is unsettling to say the least. And at first read seems to be a time when Jesus seems to misuse his power, but is he - or is something else at play here?

Jesus has entered into Tyre and Sidon where the Canaanite woman instantly greets him. It is remarkable enough that word about Jesus had spread to this region that this woman would somehow know who Jesus is

The woman greets Jesus as the "Son of David." Her recognition is all the more remarkable because the disciples have been a bit slow in recognizing Jesus. Yet, this woman hails Jesus, begs his mercy, and asks his power over a demon that has "severely" possessed her daughter (v. 22). How is it possible that this woman has more insight into Jesus' identity than his disciples?

Jesus' response is, perhaps, the most perplexing piece of this narrative. At first, he does not say a word to her, but he refuses to send her away. Only after her persistence does he converse with her. The disciples kept telling him to send her away because they are tired of hearing her cries for help (15:23).

Perhaps, Jesus' refusal to listen to the disciples gave the woman hope that her request would be heard. She does something that is significant in this Gospel: she kneels before him. The author of Matthew uses this action as one befitting a king. Kneeling is not only a sign of kingship, but also recognition of power. There is a connection between those who kneel before Jesus and the healings that Jesus performs. A leper kneels before Jesus and asks to be made clean (Matt 8:2). A ruler kneels and asks for his daughter's healing (9:18). This woman kneels before one whom she recognizes as

having authority not only to sit on the throne of David, but to wield power over evil.

Despite Jesus first response which is to dismiss her, she is not deterred. She claims a place in the household, but it is not a position of power. She accepts the status of a family's dog by claiming that even the dog enjoys crumbs from the table.

Her statement is striking. She places hope in what others have discarded. This Son of David has so much power that there is enough power for the even for those with none. She is not trying to thwart his mission she just wants to be part of it. We are given an image of power which transcends the whole kingdom of God.

Jesus praises her faith. This woman seems to understand what the disciples have yet to grasp. Jesus has come to change the balance of power, change our perceptions, and reshape our hopes – Jesus has come that all might have power which is used appropriately.

The Canaanite woman, despite all that she had been through had faith, believed that her prayers would be answers, stood against the crowd and demanded help. She also named the power, named when it was used well, and named the difference that shared power can have.

This is the power of doing and being right! The ability to name power, acknowledge how it is used, and sharing it as it is needed.

This is a message for our time too – that we need to use our power well. Use it to build us and heal; not tear down and destroy.

What we learn from these passages is that God's message is consistent throughout all time – change can only take place when humanity allows itself to embrace God. To be open to a new way of using power that allows us to face head on the difficult questions of 'what is right and good' – but to do this we need to allow God to be the source of the power which sustains us.

So let us be like the Canaanite woman, who had the courage to kneel in pray, consistently each day, longing and believing that it can be different. Amen.