

*The Poured Out Life: Pour Out Safeness*

Matthew 15:21-28

If you follow news of tech start-ups (which I generally don't), you may have already heard about a recent upset in the Board of Virgin Galactica, a company you might connect with the name of its founder Richard Branson. A venture capitalist whose name is Chamath Palihapitiya had been Chair of the Virgin Galactica Board. He resigned in February after he stirred up an uncomfortable public controversy by broadcasting a statement on social media that said, 'nobody cares about what's happening to the Uyghurs'. The Uyghurs are an ethnic group of Muslims in China. For years, the Chinese government has been trying to exterminate this group of ethnic and religious foreigners. The government in Beijing has forced Uyghur adults into re-education and hard labor camps, tortured them, starved them, prohibited them from practicing their religion, taken and re-educated their children.

Palihapitiya's comment was insensitive and cruel, but he was actually a little bit right. China's ethnic cleansing has been in the news for years. There's been very little interest from the western world, certainly no concerted action to stop it.

We have to notice the contrast, I think, between our slender, distant sympathy for these dark-skinned people in China and the way Europeans and Americans have been activated by the Russian attack on Ukraine. Many people have asked: Is our outpouring of support and empathy for Ukrainians natural because they are white and educated and relatively affluent? Do we identify with Ukrainians because many of them look like many of us?

I hate that question. I bet you do too. I want the answer to be 'No, of course not.' But I'm not sure that would be the honest answer.

My ethics professor in seminary used to say that the question at the base of many of our ethical dilemmas is *Whose suffering matters?* Whose suffering are we willing to change our behavior to do something about? Whose suffering do we even see?

We just read a story about Jesus that calls us to the same questions. It's an uncomfortable story, a story we avoid talking about, because some of the words that came out of Jesus' mouth sound harsh. They don't match the kindness and inclusive compassion that Jesus usually models for us. And that's the great gift of this story. We get to watch Jesus himself wrestle with the question '*Whose suffering matters?*'

There are two characters in this story: Jesus and a Canaanite woman. 'Canaanite' means nothing to us, of course; but to the people who heard this story first, it said a lot. Canaanites were Gentile, not Jewish. But they were not only different; they were enemy. The 'land of Canaan' was where the exodus had led. For forty years the Israelites, Jesus' ancestors, trekked through the desert behind Moses, on their way to the land God had promised to them. When they finally arrived, it turned out the land was already occupied. Canaanites lived in Canaan. What a surprise. The Canaanites stood in between God's people and God's promise to them. That is an ethnic resentment that does not fade easily, even after hundreds—thousands—of years.

This story happens in Tyre, a city outside of Israel, part of Syria today. Jesus has gone there on vacation, to get away from his work for a little while. Somehow this woman finds him, interrupts his sabbath. She shouts at him to get his attention. ‘My daughter is suffering terribly from mental illness,’ she says too loudly. ‘You have to help her.’

Many artists have imagined this scene. Always, they show Jesus with his hand held palm out. He is turned slightly away from this woman, as if to say, ‘No, I can’t help you.’ And that’s exactly what the story says: that when this woman asks Jesus for healing, his first response to her is ‘No.’ “Let the children be fed first,” Jesus says. She understands what he means by this: ‘I am a Jew. I’ve come to heal and feed my own people. You are from a different tribe. You are not my concern.’ In a rare moment of what sounds to our ears like real meanness, Jesus effectively says to her, ‘You don’t have a seat at this table.’

But this woman is insistent; she will not go away. ‘I get it,’ she says, “but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” I think it must have been the cheekiness of that sentence that turns Jesus’ face toward her. She is protesting. She is willing to break every rule of courtesy and propriety, because her daughter is sick. Her daughter needs healing.

This woman has burst in through the gatekeepers to get to Jesus. She’s violated national boundaries, religious boundaries, gender boundaries. And by talking about giving humans’ food to dogs, she is plowing right through Jewish purity laws—the most visible, carefully-practiced boundary there is between Jews and Gentiles. She is daring Jesus into a wider compassion. If there were other people around this conversation, they must have gasped.

And then this amazing thing happens. Jesus listens to her, and he relents. ‘I understand,’ he says. ‘You can go home now. The demon has left your daughter.’ Jesus changes his mind. This woman, this Gentile, this enemy, has persuaded him. He heals her daughter.

This is the moment in Matthew’s Gospel when everything shifts. If you read the whole Gospel carefully you can see it. Visibly, clearly, from this point on, Jesus’ work turns away from its focus on reforming his own religion, saving ‘his people’. Jesus’ story becomes a message of healing and hope to the whole world.

There’s so much to notice in this story.

Notice that the whole incident takes place outside of Jesus’ home base. He has left his safe surroundings and traveled into a place where he is surrounded by Canaanites, people who are not *his* people. Is this dangerous for him? Maybe. Probably. It is at least unfamiliar.

Notice the mutuality of this exchange. Neither the woman nor Jesus stands back, or retreats into surface politeness, to avoid confronting one another. They address each other honestly, authentically. Each of them takes the risk of stepping outside the lines they have drawn—around their dignity, their circle of belonging, the shield of their self-protection. Because they take that risk, something opens up. Something new can happen.

Notice how they listen to each other. They stay in the conversation even after uncomfortable things are said, things that might have prompted them to turn and walk away, give up on the likelihood that they will understand the other, that they will be understood. They are in this

together; they remain face-to-face through the other's anger, frustration, even rudeness. All the elements of conflict and misunderstanding are there—the daughter's illness, the mother's desperate fierceness, Jesus' firm sense of the boundaries on his calling, the unresolvable-ness of all of it—together. And still, they do not walk away.

One of the things about our privilege is that it can insulate us from having to deal with many unresolvable situations, things that are hard to watch, people who seem a little bit out of control. I can choose whether to turn on the news and watch graphic images of war. I can click my tongue from the safety of my car about the eyesore of homeless encampments. I have never seen a protester in downtown Los Altos. I can go for days, weeks even, without encountering someone who makes me uncomfortable or afraid.

When my stepson Brendan was in high school, he had a social studies teacher who required his students to earn 'stretch marks' every semester, for crossing through the tunnel that separated Contra Costa County from Oakland and Berkeley, visiting a place that their parents usually tried to keep them away from. Sometimes I think I need a stretch mark requirement too.

The neatness of my adult life struck me hard last week, as I read something written by a father talking about his young children.

*Kids force you to live constantly in the extremes. You are trapped in a room with someone you love, someone you love helplessly, whose experience fills you with genuine, deep compassion, who you will give every license to, and who is acting like a total monster, completely not showing you reciprocity or respect or anything. And what do you do then?<sup>i</sup>*

He's right, isn't he? We instinctively love our children. We will stay with them no matter what it takes, no matter how much chaos and uncertainty they expose us to, no matter how much aggravation they cause us or how long they refuse to see things our way.

Who else are we that committed to? How far beyond our family, or maybe our friends, 'people like us', are we inclined to extend our lives toward?

It is an article of our faith that this is how God loves us and all of creation: enough to hold all the world's brutality and sorrow and suffering without giving up on us, without folding up into cynicism or despair. Enough to stay with us, to absorb our anger, to weather the unpredictability of our responses. The excessiveness of our demands.

What would it mean for us to live our lives in that same poured-out shape, not only toward the people we are related to by parentage or blood or easy empathy, but with people we are bound to by nothing more than our common humanity? We might have to listen to hard stories, stay with people who have been hurt by systems and boundaries we take for granted, expose ourselves to anger that makes us a little bit afraid.

One way to read stories from the Bible is to ask which character in the story we identify with. I usually think we should steer away from thinking that we're Jesus. We are generally *not* Jesus. But today's story offers us an opening, I think—to see ourselves in the full humanness that prompted Jesus' initial reserve toward the woman who challenged his way of thinking, the

enclosure around his circle of concern. I wonder if we too could stay in a hard conversation until our minds are changed by an enemy's pain. To imagine ourselves pouring out immoderately, unguardedly, from the glass of power and security and abundance we have been given—so that others can live whole lives too.

May it be so for us.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ezra Klein, 'What If We Respected Toddlers as Whole People?', *New York Times*, February 15, 2022