

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
20th August 2023 (Proper 15A-1)
Saint Mark's, Penn Yan
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Transformation: Our First Thought

In the name of the Holy and Undivided Trinity: One God. **Amen.**

In the world of DEI—diversity, equity, and inclusion—and the work that surrounds it, one of the common early pieces of DEI training centers around an idea that, as a human being who developed and was socialized within a certain context, you are not responsible for your first thought. You are not responsible for your first thought. It highlights that because of the various contexts in which we've grown up, we all have a few biases or ways of looking at the world through a particular lens—which sometimes may not be grounded in reality or fact.

These biases shape the ways we look at others, their situations, their lives, and the way they live... biased against the way we look at ourselves, our situations, our lives, or the way we live. Perhaps it's natural that we all want **our** way of doing things to be the “right” way, or the “best” way because it's given us the things we cherish in our lives now, but it also helps us to use that framework that to examine how the rest of the world works.

When I was quite young, I spent a lot of time with my grandparents (my father's parents), largely because both of my parents worked a lot. My grandparents lived in one of those typical Baltimore City rowhomes built after World War II—three rooms upstairs, three rooms on the ground floor, and theirs had a kitchen in the basement. Those of you who've already heard stories about my grandmother might remember that she was 5'2” and about 370 pounds—a weight that meant she had some difficulty getting up and down the steps to the basement.

My father would often take her grocery shopping, and on the return trip, she'd go inside and make her way downstairs as we carried the groceries over to the kitchen window and then passed them through the open window into the kitchen downstairs.

On one particular Saturday, after schlepping the groceries through the window and then the two of us returning to the front porch to relax, two women approached the house on the sidewalk. They said they were taking up a collection of food for their church. My grandmother was generally a pretty charitable woman, so she invited the two ladies inside and said she'd go downstairs and get a few things from the kitchen. One of the ladies sat with me in the front room, the sitting room, while the other lady went and sat in the middle room of the house, where the steps down to the kitchen were. My grandmother went down, put together some boxes of pasta, sauce, a few tins of tuna and vegetables, and returned again up the steps with the food for these two ladies, who said thank you and went on their way. It wasn't until a few minutes later, when my grandmother returned to that middle room, where her recliner and television were, that she noticed her wastebasket was tipped over, and her fat white wallet was inside it.

Maybe my grandmother was as charitable as she was foolish—foolish to leave her wallet sitting in her recliner while she went downstairs, or maybe foolish to keep as much cash as she did in her wallet... Either way, the police were called, the women were found and arrested, and that was that... Except not.

The concealed detail of the story—and maybe you assumed it yourself—is that the women were Black. And that my grandmother, like many white women of a certain age living south of the Mason-Dixon line, had some ideas about Black people (and some language about Black people) that were inherently racist. I won't recount them for you, but I'm sure you can imagine what they might be... and probably some that would surprise you.

I share all of this because it's part of the history of my "first thought"—and my parents' "first thought." But there's a second part of that piece of theory from the DEI training: "You're not responsible for your first thought, but you are responsible for your second thought and your first action."

When we grow up in a culture and context that looks at the world through a certain lens—through a perspective that's just become part of who we are—it's really sometimes difficult to see another way of understanding what's going on around you. It's difficult to even know that there is some kind of alternative—greater than that which you could imagine—and ten times more difficult still to open yourself up to the transformative power of seeing the humanity of another—seeing the face of God in another. And so maybe this theory from DEI training helps us know how to map that out in our lives—if we understand that our first thought is part of who we've been socialized to be, then we know that our second thought and whatever comes after has to be informed by a different way of looking at the world.

I've always really loved this passage from Matthew (and its parallel story in Mark) because it puts this theory at work in our Christian scripture... Here Jesus is, away from Galilee and Jerusalem, surrounded by Gentiles—and meets this Canaanite woman, a woman who herself is displaced in a territory that's not her own... And she sees in him what she needs—the power to heal her daughter—and she believes that healing is possible through Jesus, so she persistently pleads, "Have mercy on me, Son of David!" And Jesus ignores her. The disciples are annoyed by her shouting, drawing attention to them, and tell him to send her away, and Jesus says, "I came only to help the lost sheep of the house of Israel." And the woman comes to him and asks for his help, "Lord, help me," with complete humility—on her knees, she says, "Lord, help me." And Jesus still says no, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs!"

Now, there's a lot of background in that single verse alone that can't be contained in these next few minutes, but I want to point to the word "dogs." In Jesus' time, Judeans didn't keep dogs—they were dirty, filthy animals who didn't belong in the home. In Hebrew scripture, prostitutes are likened to dogs, and dogs often point to something demonic. But "dogs," in this context, points to something else... In the Greek, it's feminine, so he's talking about female dogs... Got me? It was a common thing for Judeans to describe outsiders in this way—its own kind of racism and xenophobia that, allegedly, Jesus carries as his first thought, the first thought for which he's not responsible.

The woman replies, "But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their masters' tables."

I think we all know Jesus never attended this DEI seminar and learned this theory that his second thought and his first action are his responsibility, but that's exactly what happens next. Jesus has been challenged in ways that others don't—ways that others fail to do or fear to do—and it changes him and reshapes how his ministry proceeds. At that moment, Jesus' humanity shows through, bright and dazzling—he messed up; he realized he messed up. What's more human than messing up? And what's more graceful than to say, “I messed up, and this is how we're going to move forward,” and then make things right—then repair that relationship?

That Canaanite woman represents all of the people who persist in their struggle, who don't relent or give up their seats—who claim their justice and their identity—and she takes that right to Jesus' feet. I'm sure she didn't know what to expect, but she knew that's what she needed to do—she knew that's what her daughter needed—and she went for it. And it challenged Jesus, made him look at his own brokenness, and showed him a way forward that was defined by loving, life-giving, and liberating transformation.

If Jesus can be transformed and changed, as he was in this story, then we too are invited into our own transformation—our own re-formation... Our own acknowledgment that the second thought and the first action are our responsibility, and we've gotta do it right because **real** things are at risk.

Jesus listened to the needs of others; are there ways we can do that better? Are we open to having our lives transformed by unlikely people—by people our first thought doesn't trust? Do we listen to the people who are always unheard by the institutions of our world: by empire, by the mechanisms of government, education, the Church, economy, and family? Do we live in such a way that we're constantly aware that we're responsible for our second thought and first action? And do we do it?

Because if Jesus can be changed—if Jesus can be transformed and shake off his own assumptions about race or class, color or creed—then this story is a way for us to understand our own need for transformation. It means that when someone points out we've done something or said something that is hurtful, we're called to shake off our own biases and not dig our heels in and deny that we've hurt someone. We need to look at these situations as opportunities for self-reflection, self-awareness, and transformation. Because if Jesus can be transformed, then so can we.