

OPENING

There is a difficult scene in the TV show “Sex and the City” in an episode appropriately entitled “The Good Fight” where the failing marriage of Charlotte, one of the main characters, and her husband, Trey, comes to a key point. After a terrible fight, Charlotte tells a friend about the deep significance of what had just happened: *Well, Trey and I hardly ever yell. We're WASPS, WASPS don't yell..... It's genetic.*

There is the famous dinner scene in Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall*. In the movie, Woody Allen’s Jewish character is dating Diane Keaton’s Gentile (non-Jewish) character. In the middle of dinner with one family, the movie screen splits to show the tables of each family, Jewish and Gentile, with two types foods and the two different atmospheres in stark contrast. Both are set in 20th century Manhattan, but are worlds apart from one another in customs, cuisine, and manner of conversation. We see the family of ‘WASPS’ (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) at a staid Easter Dinner with conversations proceeding in an orderly fashion, tension boiling though just below the surface. As this is playing out before our eyes, the cut is then made in the film to Allen’s Jewish family, we now encounter a totally different culture, where conversations confusingly overlap, with family members interrupting one another, and with no topic off-limit.

All those depictions are generalizations, stereotypes even, crafted in Hollywood for our amusement and enjoyment.

SHIFT:

Our Gospel exists in a setting where two different cultures are similarly colliding and coming to terms with difference. It too says something about tensions involving race, ethnicity, religion, and gender.

Our Gospel this morning features a short, tense argument between a Gentile woman, a Syrophoenician, whose daughter is sick and Jesus, a tired, and seemingly cranky, Jewish rabbi. An argument breaks out, and Jesus..... *loses* that argument??

By my count, most of the Gospel narrative features Jesus *winning* arguments. He wins over his parents in the temple when only a child, he runs circles around his disciples too many times to count, and he overwhelms the Pharisees. The rich man does not

stand a chance against him, nor does Nicodemus or Pontius Pilate, even Martha complaining about doing too much work she's no match for Jesus.

Jesus might well be the "Perry Mason" the "Harlem Globetrotters" of 1st century debaters. But here, in our story today, seems to be the only argument that Jesus ever loses.

ARGUMENT:

Before returning to the text, I would submit that argument itself is hard-wired into our faith and our faith's history. The easiest evidence is the word "Israel" itself, which means "to wrestle with God." The patriarch Jacob was given the name "Israel" after he wrestled—the most visceral way to argue—with an angel, after which Jacob says that he had seen God "face to face" and receives his new name and blessing.¹

Jesus also spends a lot of time engaging in argument. Jesus, particularly the Jesus depicted in Mark, is not a pleasant guru wandering around the countryside dispensing fortune cookies of advice to make people feel better. Rather, he's the frantic healer, who is in constant motion, often successful, sometimes not, who has tactile encounters with all with whom he comes into contact with.

These patterns suggest a life of faith that's a struggle, a passionate argument. Christine last week highlighted, in the Song of Songs and elsewhere, a narrative thread running through our Scriptures of a passionate love affair, between God and humanity, where there is communion and embrace, but also difficulty and distance and argument

In other words, to return to the opening, we should be saying: *as Christians, we yell, we yell all the time, it's Genetic, it's in our DNA.*"

Where do we get it from? How did we inherit such genes?

One scholar puts it this way: "The special status of Israel rests not upon her merits, her strength or numbers or intelligence or honesty, but upon something irrational, a passion, an affair of the heart, not the mind, in short a love. All the efforts to explain the special destiny of Israel in rational terms only dissolve its power."²

In our faith lives, argument and conflict should not necessarily be signs of trouble or discord, but rather of honesty and authenticity.

¹ Genesis 32.

² Levenson, Jon Douglas. 1985. *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*. Minneapolis: Winston. 76-77.

BACK to the Syrophenician woman and our TEXT:

There are ways to wiggle around our text, to maintain Jesus' undefeated stretch of arguments.

Some people say:

- 1) This was just Jesus on a bad day, interrupted rudely on his day-off, and we should give him a mulligan.
- 2) Other say that maybe he had a facial expression that somehow explained his argument in some way. So, and I am not making this up, maybe Jesus was *winking* and thus he was on the side of the woman the entire time, he was just engaging her to convince his disciples that salvation should be opened to all Gentiles.
- 3) Some try to parse the role of dogs in Mediterranean culture of the 1st century. Are we talking wild dogs or domesticated? Maybe he was just saying "puppie"?
- 4) A final way of wiggling around this, suggested by Martin Luther and others, is that Jesus was trying to push the Syrophenician woman, that this is a story of Persistent Faith where it seems like God is saying 'no', but actually is saying 'yes'. That Jesus wanted to push the woman towards a tenacious and unyielding faith, that is why he was so rude to her.

Those very well may be true interpretations. It's something that indeed we need to argue about. And anyone who has ever been in a relationship knows that *how you remember* an argument is important, maybe just as important as *what* you are arguing about.

By my estimation, the plain sense of the text seems to say that Jesus lost the argument, and we are stuck with that, even if it makes us uncomfortable. We wish that we could construct Jesus in the 21st century Internet that would be as "woke" or as virtuous as we are. But he was incarnate *there*, in Palestine, 2000 years ago. So we have to argue that out and consider what a Jewish male of the 1st century would have thought and considered about a women confronting him in *that* context.

I don't know if Jesus does not need us to defend him, and how could we. Jesus lowered himself to live among us and to die on the Cross. My thought is then that he had it in him, to lose an argument to a foreign woman. And maybe even admit that he was wrong?

CONCLUSION:

In the end, we probably should not expect to win our arguments against God, but the struggle and wrestling are key elements in to how we encounter God. The Syrophenician woman stands in that long tradition of argument and debate. Her *chutzpah*, so to speak, should be celebrated and lifted up.

Two short anecdotes to close:

The story is told that the famous German physicist, Max Planck, died and went to heaven. St. Peter met him at the gate saying, ‘Professor Planck, *this* door goes to the Kingdom of Heaven, while *this* door leads to a discussion about the Kingdom of Heaven.’ Apparently for Planck, who had spent his whole life studying the building blocks of life, as well as the argument between science and religion, the latter door was too attractive.³

Second story, in his autobiography, writer Nikos Kazantzakis recounts a conversation he had with an elderly priest of great wisdom. Kazantzakis asked:

“Do you still wrestle with the devil, Father Makários?”

The priest answered: “Not any longer, my child. I have grown old now, and he has grown old with me. He doesn’t have the strength... I wrestle with God.”

“With God!.... and you hope to win?” exclaimed the writer

“I hope to lose, my child, My bones remain with me still, and they continue to resist.”⁴

May we, in our lives,
possess the courage of those who were/are willing to argue,
to debate,
as we rest in the knowledge that our faith tells us
that we engage in those arguments in the presence of an all-loving, merciful and
healing God.

AMEN

³ Willimon, William “[What Time is It?](#)” Long, Thomas G., and Cornelius Plantinga. 1994. ‘A Chorus of Witnesses’: *Model Sermons for Today's Preacher*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans. 105.

⁴ Rolheiser, Ronald. 2014. *The Holy Longing: the Search for a Christian Spirituality*. Princeton, NJ: Image, 266.