

Struggling for a Win/Win
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True confession – I am a pretty competitive person.

When my spouse Anne and I were dating, we learned pretty quickly that we were both competitive people – a leisurely game of pool or putt putt could get pretty serious, pretty quick.

Our family game nights with our kids, whether cards, board games, basketball in the driveway or soccer in the back yard can be pretty epic as well!

As an undergrad psych major, I've enjoyed taking various personality tests over the years. You might be familiar with the Strengths Finder – my number one strength is achiever. Or might be familiar with the Enneagram – I am an Enneagram 8, commonly referred to as the challenger.

I enjoy being physically active, but I've also been a mediocre athlete. I don't have great hand eye coordination. I joke that I am not good at any sport with a ball or a net. This is why I fell in love with running. Running cross country and track, it didn't matter how I placed in a race, I could always compete against myself. Pushing myself to get that PR, to improve my time each time I hit the trail or the track.

I love this phrase in the Spanish speaking world – “en la lucha.” Popular to the people in the Caribbean Islands (like Puerto Rico and Cuba), it means “in the struggle.” And is used by folk to describe living with and facing the difficulties and pressures of everyday life.

Competition, achievement, challenge, struggle – this is my default setting, my bias in understanding and moving through the world.

So, as I have read and re-read today's scripture reading over the years, I also approach it through the lens of competition and struggle.

In the first scene, Jesus is squaring off against the Pharisees, interrogating and critiquing the purity codes related to food. Specifically, that someone was morally unclean if they ate certain “unclean” foods.

This is an intra-Jewish debate. Jesus as the leader of a Jewish renewal movement is criticizing the legalism of his own religious tradition and the leaders upholding it. We must take care not to read this and other intra-Jewish debates and criticisms in the New Testament as blanket statements against the totality of Judaism, ancient and modern.

That anti-Jewish way of reading this and other scriptural texts has perpetuated deadly anti-Semitism across the centuries.

Jesus then argues it is not what goes in the mouth that defiles, but what comes out of it that reveals the inner state of one's heart; it reveals that which harms others.

In this way, Jesus shifts the focus of religious practices from disciplining one's diet to disciplining one's dispositions.

The Pharisees are upset and a bit scandalized — the gospel portrays Jesus as the winner of this debate, cleverly turning a phrase to make his point. Game. Set. Match. Jesus.

In the second scene, the tables are turned. The script is flipped.

Jesus and his disciples make their way to the region of Tyre and Sidon, a place at the northern edge of the Galilee, a border town between Jewish and Canaanite, non-Jewish, communities.

There, a Canaanite woman confronts Jesus and asks him to heal her sick daughter.

The text suggests Jesus initially ignores her and only responds to her request because the disciples plead for Jesus to send her away.

The woman, persistent, tenacious, is making a ruckus, is making the disciples squirm. She refuses to leave until she is acknowledged and heard.

Jesús denies any responsibility to the woman and her daughter. His mission is to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Adding insult to injury, Jesus escalates the situation

“Is it fair to toss the children's food to the dogs?”

Did you catch that? Jesus just called the woman and her daughter “dogs.” In our day, calling women dogs is a common profanity, a gender slur. In Jesus' day, scholars surmise, “dogs” was a common profanity, a racial slur for Canaanites.

Is this not Jesus at his worst? It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles but what comes out of it that defiles. Jesus reveals the bias against the woman and her people that resides deep in his and his disciples' hearts.

I imagine the woman was ready for the familiar sting of this slur. I imagine she had heard it before; hurled at her and her family and her neighbors. I imagine her parents had “the talk” with her about this word and that she had a similar talk with her children.

She is ready for Jesus' all to predictable response. Without missing a beat, she retorts: "Yes, but even the dogs get crumbs."

Abruptly the gospel writer portrays Jesus making a 180 — "you have great faith. Your daughter is healed."

Game. Set. Match. Canaanite Woman.

As far as I can tell in my reading of the gospels, this is the one and only time Jesus is bested in an argument.

Jesus and the Canaanite woman are definitely "en la lucha," "in the struggle." It is a battle of wills and wits.

The script is indeed flipped.

Outside of his intra-Jewish context, in the unfamiliar territory of a cross-cultural borderland, Jesus is more like a legalistic Pharisee than a liberating Messiah. He, and his disciples, are undisciplined in their biased disposition. It is his heart and movement that are in need of renewal and reform, spewing slurs more fit for the sewer than the sanctuary. It is the Canaanite woman who displays a disciplined disposition, undeterred by Jesus' insult, and reveals a pure heart focused on the survival of her daughter, and witness to God's grace.

Because this story is preserved and passed on in two gospels — Matthew and Mark — we know it was important for the earliest Christians. It held critical truths for the fledgling movement:

- Even Jesus got it wrong, so don't be surprised when you do.
- Sometimes you find yourself as the one on the margins. Sometimes as the one in the center. When you are on the margins, expect opposition, take heart and fight for what you know is right. When you are in the center your worst biases will come to the surface, you will need to listen to the margins and admit when you are wrong.
- We need each other, especially moments of cross cultural interaction and struggle, to heal and thrive.

This is an important story and critical truth for us today. Especially as people who consider ourselves as part of a progressive, social justice church and connected to social justice causes, movements, and organization.

As we know all too well, even progressive and justice seeking people and organizations are not immune to bias — racism, classism, sexual, heterosexism, and transphobia.

As people used to being on the prophetic edge, to calling out others, to seeing ourselves on the right side of history, it is tempting to identify ourselves with the Canaanite woman.

Our ancestors in the faith invite us to flip the script and linger with the critical truth.

Sometimes we are like Jesus.

Like Jesus, sometimes we get it wrong.

Like Jesus, sometimes we find ourselves in the center when, with power over others we succumb to our worst biases.

Like Jesus, sometimes we need to listen, to center voices that are new and unfamiliar.

Like Jesus, sometimes we have to admit we are wrong and that we have caused harm.

Like Jesus, we have to acknowledge healing from another source.

The good news is that like Jesus, we too can make a 180, we can also turn about.

The good news is we don't have to be perfect, we don't have to save and heal everyone.

The good news is that when we stumble and confront our own limitations, there are other leaders, prophets, and healers to show us the way.

The good news is that we are not alone. God is always drawing the circle wider than we can perceive, casting a larger net than we are comfortable with ... showing us love and justice, healing and liberation, is more spacious than we can ever dare to imagine.

The good news is that when we lean into the "lucha" ... lean into the struggle together, when we confront and struggle with bias together, when we make our stand with courage and boldness, when we are honest about the places where we need to grow and learn,

We struggle not for achievement and competition .. we struggle for mutual survival and thriving ... we struggle for a win/win.