

Accelerating the Timeline [OR The Zipper Merge Gets Us There Sooner]

Matthew 15:10-28 and Genesis 45:1-15

Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on August 20, 2023

Picture this, we're merrily driving along in two lanes, getting where we're going at a reasonable speed. Suddenly traffic slows. Up ahead we can see a flashing arrow redirecting us from two lanes down to one. People start merging over and before we know it, the lane that's going to end is wide open for a quarter mile, maybe half a mile. What do we do? Do we start merging early? Or do we go for the zipper merge and drive up the empty lane until the last possible merge point? Traffic engineers tell us that the very legal zipper merge is the most efficient way to keep traffic moving when lanes decrease.¹ I'm going to confess to being a zipper fan. One of the few here in Denver as far as I can tell. In the zipper merge, we use all the lanes right up to the cones and flashing arrow sign and then we alternate taking turns merging into the open lane. I can't tell you the number of times that I've been in a zipper merge situation where someone who is an early merger blocks me from a lane that's ending way up ahead as if I'm the demonic fiery beast Balrog in Lord of the Rings and they're Gandalf – "YOU. SHALL. NOT. PASS!"² But the reality is that we all get where we're going faster if we take advantage of the zipper merge, filling both traffic lanes as long as possible, and then taking turns to merge. Did I say that it's legal? I've footnoted it in my sermon. Check it out. Honestly, in the thick of traffic, who doesn't want to accelerate the timeline of getting all of us where we're going sooner?

Accelerating the timeline is one way to understand the Canaanite woman in our Bible story today.³ She's very hard to ignore, taking up space and making noise where she's not wanted. We often don't know what to do with her any more than Jesus' disciples did at the time. They just wanted her to stay in her lane, out of their way. The Bible would be easier to read without her there. And there she is,

¹ Miles Blumhardt, "Roundabouts and zipper merging are polarizing, but here's why traffic experts say they work." September 23, 2021, for the Fort Collins Coloradoan. <https://www.coloradoan.com/story/news/2021/09/23/roundabouts-and-zipper-merge-how-do-them-and-why-they-work/5795436001/>

² Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring (2002). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bReJswiMGM>

³ Matt Skinner, Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. Sermon Brainwave Podcast for the 12th Sunday after Pentecost, August 20, 2023. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/917-12th-sunday-after-pentecost-ord-20a-aug-20-2023>.

demanding that Jesus help her even after he calls her a dog. Most interpretations of this story leave us wanting, like finishing a puzzle only to find there aren't enough pieces.⁴ The interpretation that I like best at the moment has us reading backwards through the story. Starting with the woman's faith. The Canaanite woman saw God's promises as including her too. She spoke with that level of dignity in her moment of desperation. Perhaps she heard the stories about Jesus feeding of the 5,000 where men, women, and children ate their fill and there were baskets of broken pieces left over.⁵ Did she equate the leftover broken pieces in those 12 baskets to the crumbs that fall from the table to the dogs? Somehow she knew that Jesus revealed God's abundance. She seemed to know that God's promise was expansive enough to include her. It's not that Jesus doesn't know about God's promise to the whole world through the Israelites.

Jesus was raised on the stories of Jacob and Joseph too. Joseph who was sold into slavery by his brothers and then became his brothers' salvation. Joseph who forgave his brothers, wept on them, fed and housed them during a multi-year famine because God gave Joseph the gift of dreams. Joseph who was part of the line of Abraham down through his father Jacob who was renamed Israel and whose descendants were called Israelites. Jesus was a part of Abraham's lineage now called Jews. Jesus revealed God and the Canaanite woman knew him by faith. God made promises to bless the whole world through Abraham's lineage.

Jesus, talking about the lost sheep of Israel, may have had a timeline in his mind in which the whole world would be blessed, but the woman accelerated it to include the Canaanites perhaps sooner than planned. The Canaanites were "Israel's notorious ancient foe."⁶ But no one wants to be left out of God's promise – especially a desperate mother. Desperation is often overlooked when groups of "others" exist who have no power. It's easy to tell the "other" group, "We can't do that right now, we have to do this in order." Or, "Well, you'll get yours later." Or to say, "Don't worry, the process moves slowly, yours will come." The woman didn't have time because her daughter didn't have time. Waiting until a more feasible time, a better time, another time, was not an option while her daughter

⁴ Skinner, *ibid*.

⁵ Matthew 14:20-21

⁶ Richard Ward, Professor (Emeritus) of Homiletics and Worship, Phillips Theological Seminary, Tulsa, OK.

suffered. I often wonder in these kinds of stories what I would have done as a mother and as a woman. What would you have done? Questions and arguments of this sort often happen across race and gender.

Arguments across race and gender often have to do with power much like the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman. We could argue that he had the power, and she didn't. But we could also argue for the power that she had through faith, a faith that gave her the dignity to fight for her daughter. Her faith saw a God of abundance and claimed Jesus as "Lord." If we're honest about the power certain groups have over and above others, we can start working together across differences, with groups of others, to find a dignified path forward for everyone.

This afternoon, Augustana's Human Dignity Delegates are inviting you on a field trip downtown to History Colorado to see the Sand Creek Massacre Exhibit that records the U.S. Military's slaughter of over 230 children, women, and elderly Arapahoe and Cheyenne people in 1864.⁷ Our Indian neighbors tell this story as not only as history, but as deeply personal and painful family history. The goal is to learn more about our Indian neighbors, so that we are equipped to love our neighbors as ourselves. To better understand Indian family history in Colorado allows for better understanding of our present moment and, perhaps, helps us to be better listeners as we attempt to live together in ways that move us all forward. If our God is a God who blessed the world through the ancient Israelites, then we are invited into God's expansive view of the world as neighbor to neighbor. If we have enemies, Jesus calls us to love our enemies earlier in Matthew's gospel, and to pray for our enemies as fellow human beings.⁸

Reading the Canaanite woman's story backwards is a good way to challenge us from a place of faith through her story of difference and into some of the Pharisees' ongoing challenge to embody the law. Pharisees were religious leaders like pastors. The law was a gift passed down to them from Moses through the generations, a baton in the form of a Torah scroll. The law was not meant for these Pharisees to follow blindly without seeing the people it affects or the God

⁷ Sand Creek Massacre Exhibit, History Colorado, Denver. <https://www.historycolorado.org/exhibit/sand-creek-massacre-betrayal-changed-cheyenne-and-arapaho-people-forever>

⁸ Matthew 5:44

who bestowed it upon them. Jesus regularly took these particular Pharisees to task in Matthew's gospel. Their high view of the law wasn't the problem. We're all supposed to see the law as a good thing – a good thing that helps us love our neighbors as ourselves.⁹ These Pharisees knew and taught their people the verse in the book of Leviticus to love neighbor as self while making religion burdensome for the very people that it was supposed to free, creating stumbling blocks around blind corners that they could not navigate.¹⁰

Holding tightly to our faith and to God's promises is encouraged. But holding tightly to tradition, to religion, at the expense of other people is something else entirely. Jesus expanded the circle of God's promises time and again. Jesus saw this woman through God's eyes. He saw her heart like God saw Job's heart, knowing Job's heart better than Job knew his own.¹¹ Jesus knows the Canaanite woman's faith and "how much she knows the promise – he can question her, talk to her, challenge her, and offend her because she knows that God is good and that's the God who Jesus is revealing in the flesh."¹² His expansion of God's promises through difference and beyond tradition means that we're here by faith today, invited to the table by the crucified and risen Jesus. We eat at a table not our own. We eat at the table of Jesus who challenges us, offends us, blesses us, and asks us to build an even longer table. Amen.

⁹ Leviticus 19:9-18, see v18.; and Matthew 22:34-40, see v.39

¹⁰ Skinner, *ibid.*

¹¹ Joy J. Moore, Professor of Biblical Preaching, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. Sermon Brainwave Podcast for the 12th Sunday after Pentecost, August 20, 2023. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/917-12th-sunday-after-pentecost-ord-20a-aug-20-2023>.

¹² *Ibid.*