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 Texts: Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8; Matthew 15: 21-28  
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### Jesus: Cold, Nasty, Irritating

Wow. It's one thing to give an angry, lay Catholic a pulpit. But one ten feet in the air? I feel up moved from up here to issue you a series of commandments and condemnations.....

"That wasn't very Christian of you". "That was an un-Christian thing to do". "You're lucky I'm a Christian, otherwise I'd...." The usual meaning: you're being mean. You're not being nice.

The usual presumption: to be Christian is to be "nice". Because Jesus must have been nice.

Almost 3 decades ago one of my closest friends was drinking herself to death. Let's call her Martha. My wife and a couple of friends came to me: YOU have to talk to Martha's husband. ME?? Why? "Cuz you're good at this". "No, I most certainly am not..." Anyway, I went to see my sister, who had an alcoholic husband and had tried to help him. She gave me two AA pamphlets to read. I was hooked on the first pages of them. I remember thinking, "this is just mental health". I met my friend for lunch, the husband. We drove to lunch in his car, had lunch, drove back to my office. I got out. I said nothing, because I was scared. At the last minute, I flagged him down before he left: "can you come up to my office for a minute?" I finally said, "I want to talk to you about your wife's illness". Instead of anger or denial, he said, "Oh what? The booze? I've been thinking about it, do you think it's getting bad?"

Following AA wisdom, I met him, and then let it go. Two years later, I got a call from him: Martha's sister and brother came to his office to tell him something had to be done. We connected to an agency in Bridgeport, they sent us a coach, and we started to meet to plan an intervention. As a professional organizer, I was struck by all of this: the careful planning of an action, rehearsals, deciding which of her kids wanted to be in it, scripts, the "ask", etc. The coach said that we should write out what we wanted to say to Martha. I said to myself, "Hurummph. I don't need to write anything out.." but something told me to do it anyway.

One morning, 13 of us ambushed Martha in her living room, her in her bathrobe. I was the "leadoff hitter", if you will. I spoke my peace – thank God I wrote it out, because my heart was in my chest and my knees were knocking. After a few more minutes as we went around the room, I was hit by a blasting insight that has had a lifelong impact on me. *Oh, I get it: this is an action on Martha, yeah: she's drinking herself to death; but this is an action on the 13 cowards in this room, including me, who couldn't get themselves together all these years to act.*

Martha went off to rehab, and that was the beginning of her now 27 years of sobriety. We confronted her. Yet she was not evil; she was not an enemy. She was and is a cherished woman, friend, mom, wife, sibling.

Those who loved her and cared for her had to move from being "nice" to this truth: *if you love somebody, you'll confront them.*

We have an extraordinary Gospel before us this morning, just extraordinary. Before we can mine its riches, we need to make sure we establish two biblical truths.

The first is that, much as it is interesting to probe our differing experiences of what the scripture says, what's more interesting is what it doesn't tell us. The first truth to establish this

morning is that, when it comes to sacred scripture, there is much we do not know. And possibly never will know. Let me give you two examples:

In the first chapter of Mark (and in Matthew and Luke) Jesus calls his first four disciples. Working fishermen, they drop their nets *immediately* and follow him. I was raised with this Word presented as another miracle of Jesus: four men, in the middle of making their livelihood, who drop what they are doing and leave their jobs behind. But: is this the first time Jesus was meeting them?

Highly doubtful. As an organizer, I'd guess he had been meeting them, developing them as leaders, getting them to know and trust one another, building a bond, for three years. When Jesus came to see them on the Sea of Galilee, it was time. *But we don't know.*

Second example of hundreds more: in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, Jesus places a child in front of Him, to answer the disciples' question of who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. He declares that "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven. Now, you parents, you teachers: were those kids 5 years old, and therefore we should be pure and innocent and wide-eyed like them? Or were they 12, and therefore we should be sniveling, self-interested, manipulative little punks? *We don't know.*

Along with what we don't know and may never know, we are burdened by a scripture that was passed down to us only as a written word. In many cases, it is read on Sunday in a dull, emotion-less monotone, with readers untrained as actors, without exposing the incredible drama inherent in it. Here's another example: the ultimate moment in Scripture: what actually happens when we die – in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew. This is what I heard growing up: "...and the people said, when did we ever see you hungry, or naked, or homeless. And God said, whenever you saw anyone, you were seeing Me..." [blasé voice]

But I picture the people questioning in this passage to be among "the haughty" – a constant Old Testament reference to those prideful people who think their riches and position are due to *their* efforts and ambitions, who look down upon and oppress the weak, the poor, the widow and the orphan. There is a deep connection in the Old Testament between the causes of oppression and suffering and the Haughty. So now the passage sounds like this: "When did we ever see *you* like that" [forceful, angry]. And if I may insert a small interpretation from the Speer bible, God answers, "You jerks. Whenever you saw anyone hungry, you were seeing ME."

So with these important, twin principles: that we don't know what's not in the scripture and that we don't have easy access to the powerful emotions and the dramas unfolding; that we have to work hard to imagine, feel, live in the context unfolding, let's turn to today's Gospel.

The Canaanite woman begs Jesus to help her. *He doesn't even answer her.*

The disciples ask Jesus to send the woman away. They shun the woman. There are all these reasons why: she annoyed them with her cries. She was a woman as well, in a society where women had little voice or stature, and "needed men to serve as intermediaries in legal and spiritual matters". She was a Gentile. One commentary notes that the Jews saw her not only as unsaved but unworthy of salvation, but of course viewed themselves as worthy. She was a Canaanite, a long-standing enemy of Israel. And, in the ethos of the time, her daughter's possession was a divine punishment for sin. All of this indicating a profound haughtiness on the part of the disciples, a self-righteousness, a self-congratulation.

The first thing that Jesus does that seems cold, nasty, is to not even recognize the unnamed woman. The second irritating thing He does is not directed toward the Canaanite woman, but toward his own disciples: he was sent to the lost sheep of Israel – that is, against the

disciples' haughtiness, He says that Israel itself is full of lost sheep. Just like in the Samaritan story, Jesus goes after his own people. Just like God in the Old Testament, against God's own people. Just like Isaiah's radical word this morning.

The woman asks Jesus for his help again. Then Jesus turns on the woman, with a remark that can only be described as hurtful, cutting. He refuses to help her. He likens her to a dog.

Now, remember, how will we see and understand the drama taking place?

First, let's get clear on the Canaanite woman: the reading of this scripture usually has her begging, in tears, weak.

Really? I read it as her boldly standing her ground and *commanding* Jesus, not begging him. She came and knelt before him: "Lord, HELP ME". Jesus says, "it's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

In the New American Version of scripture that I use, she replies, "YES IT IS". She openly contradicts him. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

"Woman! You have GREAT faith!! Your request is done".

What made Jesus think she had great faith? I think it is this: that she defied all ancient norms and expectations, and boundaries, and stood up for herself and her beloved daughter, and that she confronted Jesus to his face [confrontation: from the Latin, to be face to face] [Actually, forehead to forehead]

As for his apparent coldness and nastiness? Nah. Any of you raised in the working class with a working class father or mother; any of you African-Americans who played "the dozens" with your friends; any of you of Irish descent who had a night with friends full of great "craic"; any of you enjoying streaming "The Bear"; any of you engaged with your siblings and your friends in the daily banter, witticisms, ranking, mockery, persiflage, badinage and repartee knows who and what Jesus was, and what he was like. He was, since I'm in church I'll use a variation of the word I'm thinking of, a "pistol". In the passage just before today's, Peter asks Jesus what the meaning of a parable is. Jesus says, and I quote, "Are you really that dull?"

Does anyone question that Jesus loved Peter with all of his heart?

Let us not insult the incarnate God by thinking he was "nice". Nice comes from a Latin word for "ignorant", and from the Old French for "stupid". Seriously. Look it up.

Jesus was not "nice", thanks be to God. And he was not cold and nasty, thanks be to God. He was real, direct, honest, curious, anxious to engage, no b.s.'er. My dad and uncles would have said of him their ultimate compliment: "there's no flies on him".

As for irritating, well, that's close. But organizers and faith leaders use a different word: Jesus was agitating. In the word of St. Paul, he sought to stir us up. To get a rise out of us – literally to get us on our feet; to get a reaction; to begin a conversation, not to close one off. Think of him once again with the woman at the well [still another major character in scripture who, because she is a woman, goes unnamed].

To what extent are you members of Old Lyme Congregational truly FOR one another? Truly interested in stirring up one another to great works, to living faith? To risk being not "nice" in order to be more like Jesus the Christ?

Don't be stupid. Don't be ignorant. Don't be nice. Be like Jesus.

If you love someone, you'll confront them.

I'll close – this was not my original plan – with the words from one of your own hymns sung this morning:

As he commands and we obey, he will reveal himself to us in conflicts, toils and sufferings encountered in his fellowship. In our experience we shall learn, as deepest mystery, who he is.

Amen.