“Later that night, I held an atlas in my lap, ran my fingers across the whole world, and whispered where does it hurt? It answered everywhere, everywhere, everywhere.” Famous Samali-Brit poet Warsan Shire wrote these words after the Paris attacks in 2015. Little did she know that for many this poem would be one that would be returned to over and over again as tragedy occurs. She just gets it. She doesn’t try to fix it or wipe it away or make it all pretty. These words sit in the real-ness, the raw-ness of life and let it hang there. Where does it hurt? Everywhere.

I returned to this poem again with the events in Charlottesville and it has just hung out in the back of my mind since then. At this point, it seems it may never leave. Hurt is universal. It is everywhere. It’s definitely one of the things that can connect us across boundaries and borders. And it can connect us through time, too.

This poem jumped again to the forefront of my mind when I read the scripture reading for today, because it hurts me a little bit every time I read this passage. This is a hard one, folks. So, let’s hold each other close a bit while we pull back the veil on this text.

Turns out Jesus isn’t perfect, which I think at a deep level is good news because it means we don’t have to be perfect either. But, let’s talk a bit about how
he’s not perfect and the hurt he causes in this text before we jump straight away to that good news. Don’t worry; the good news is coming I think, I hope.

The text doesn’t start out too bad. Jesus is teaching about what defiles or doesn’t defile people, ya know, normal bible stuff. And Jesus ends in a pretty cool spot in that lesson. It’s not what you put in your mouth, or what your body looks like that matters instead it’s what originates in your heart and what you project out into the world that matters. Woah. I’m behind that. Because from there the easy place to go is well, pretty rad, that means Jesus is saying, “race, ethnicity, gender, disability, class...” none of that defiles you, none of that makes you impure or unclean. None of it. Yes. I’m down with that.¹

And why I’m really down with that is because what matters then, what can defile us, are the words that come out of our mouths. Words can hurt. That old playground saying, “sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me,” is just not true. Words can hurt. The words we use can deeply injure others and ourselves. So, what Jesus says is sort of like the biblical times version of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream when he said: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Yes, Jesus, said that, too. Preach.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3360
But, then the passage continues. And this is the part where Jesus’ words hurt. This is confusing right because he just gave this whole speech about how words matter. But, this just shows how human Jesus really was. He screws up just like the rest of us.

So, here’s what happened. A Canaanite woman needs help. She is a woman in pain, a fierce mother concerned about the life of her daughter. At first, she is screaming, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” And Jesus ignores her.

Clearly she is making a scene. And to be clear, more than the shouting is making a scene. Difference is a major part of this story. Between the Canaanite woman and Jesus there are “differences of ethnicity, heritage, religion, and gender.” These differences separate her not only from Jesus, but they also separate her “from Judean social norms.” And in addition, she’s shouting, “would have been unacceptable for a woman. Her culture expects women to be reserved in public. So, she is violating social norms left and right here.”

The disciples are not happy. Who is this woman and why is she being so inappropriate? She can’t just shout demands at Jesus. Ugh. Send her away,” they say. After that speech Jesus just gave about how our words matter it’d be logical here to expect him to say, “Come on guys, did you not just hear what I said, this

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2 Jae Won Lee. Feasting on the Word. p. 359
3 Ibid.
woman is telling us her daughter is in pain, she called me by respectful titles, let’s hear her out.” But, he doesn’t.


But, this Canaanite woman will not give up. She digs in deeper. She kneels down and begs, “Lord, help me,” she pleads. Surely, that’s got to get Jesus on her side, ride? She is literally on her knees, at a low point in her life, doing whatever she has to do, begging for the life of her daughter.

And then comes the worst part of this whole story. These words: “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” I don’t even need to put that into our modern language for you to know how hurtful those words are. Where does it hurt? Everywhere. Everywhere. Everywhere.

Now, people love to try and clean up this text. They say, “Oh, that was actually a kind term because people at that time had dogs as pets and actually the Greek says little dog so it’s like Jesus was calling her a puppy which isn’t that, right?” Really, come on. No. So then they say, “Well Jesus was testing her, he knew all along that he would heal her daughter.” Nope. Sorry. That would make Jesus intentionally cruel it’s just not in the text. So, no again.
Jesus succumbs to cultural norms here. He marginalizes the marginalized. And, this is the low point, folks. This hurts. Jesus is not the good guy at this point in the story. One theologian says that in this text, “Jesus is caught with his compassion down and forced to confront his own privilege.”


But, there’s good news here. Now, I want to preface this, it’s not like hooray, let’s celebrate, party time good news. This is like real life, difficult stuff, take a good hard look in the mirror and make a change good news. Which is still good news, but it’s work. The good news is that Jesus changes his mind in this text. Jesus wrestles with his privilege and comes out on the side of the marginalized. This woman changes Jesus’ mind. “Woman, great is your faith! Your daughter is healed,” Jesus says. And in that moment Jesus models something so human and so real. Jesus was wrong. And instead of being caught up in it, or feeling guilty, or hemming and hawing, Jesus changes. He listens to her. He helps her. He expands his understanding of who is welcome and worthy of his time.

But, I think this story gets even more radical. Because the other really powerful piece of this story, the piece that doesn’t hurt, is that this marginalized, strong woman is our teacher. This ancient text, written in a time when patriarchy ruled made it through centuries of edits and changes, and somehow it’s still in

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4 Iwan Russell-Jones. Feasting on the Word. p. 358
here. Somehow we get to hear about how this strong, brave, marginalized woman changes Jesus’ mind. She is Jesus’ teacher in this text. And she is our teacher, too.

So, I think it’s pretty common that when you hear a story you try to figure out which character you connect with the most in that story. I’m not going to lie, I think I’ve taken every quiz on Buzzfeed about which Game of Thrones character I am. And we do that with bible stories, too, right? Think about it, where are you in this story? Are you the woman fighting, pushing for something you believe in deeply? Are you the disciples who just want this all to stop, just ignore the deep issues and go about your day? Are you Jesus, someone brave enough to learn that you are wrong and expand your thinking? At different points in our lives and in response to different situations I think we are all each of them, right? But, none of them is the easy one. They all hurt at least little bit.


Civil rights icon, Ruby Sales, says that she discovered a question that had “the power to drive to the heart of the matter.”5 “Where does it hurt?” is that question. She says it’s a question we rarely know how to ask those we know well let alone those we don’t. Sales says, this one question can “unleash territory in people they’ve never shared before.” Where does it hurt?

That’s our question. That’s our role. We need to stop those disciples who are trying to brush this woman aside and go about their business and ask, “Where does it hurt?” We need to look Jesus right in the face when he is trying to ignore this woman and say, “Where does it hurt?” We need to get on the floor with the Canaanite woman, hold her close and ask her “Where does it hurt?” while we join our voices with hers until it is heard. We need to turn to each other and ask, “Where does it hurt?” and care enough to listen to the answer. We need to take some time to ourselves and ponder deeply within ourselves, “Where does it hurt?”

It hurts everywhere. And there is beauty everywhere. That tension is just the complexity of human life. But, I believe deeply and with all of my heart, that if we ask this question enough of each other, of ourselves and of our world, “Where does it hurt?” we might not have to answer “everywhere” anymore. Amen.