

This is Us: 6. How to Love Difficult People

Matthew 15:21-28

October 14, 2018

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Nothing brings greater joy to life than relationships and nothing brings us greater pain than relationships. This is us. We have this innate yearning to connect, to love and be loved. And yet, here's the challenge – to find that with actual, real-life people. In some ways, it's like the porcupine. We don't see the porcupine as a lovable, cuddly animal. Its Latin name means "the irritable back" and they all have one. But even porcupines don't want to be alone. If that were true, we'd have no more porcupines. But get too close to a porcupine, and what happens? The porcupine's dilemma – how does a porcupine get close to another porcupine? And that's our dilemma too. Do you know someone who when you get close to them, they do something or say something that burrows under your skin and hurts. We want to get close, but we find ourselves hurting or being hurt by those we long to be closer to. Do you know a prickly, porcupine kind of person? But the problem is not just them. I'm somebody's porcupine and so are you!

In this series, This is Us, we have been looking at the relationships in our lives and how God works through relationships. This morning, I want to conclude by looking at not what's easy about love, but what's difficult about it. It's easy to say, "I love everybody," but the truth is there are people in our lives who are hard to love.

Maybe it's someone who is super critical or always negative, or someone focused only on themselves and expects the whole world to revolve around them. Or, maybe it's someone who doesn't listen and is not at all compassionate. Or someone so opinionated that you avoid any conversation with them. Or someone who has hurt you in the past and even taken advantage of you and you do everything to avoid them but they keep showing up at the same places that you do. It's that person who gets under your skin and you don't even know why. A moment of confession: If there's ever been someone in your life who is hard to love, would you raise your hand? If you didn't raise your hand, maybe that person is you!

Following Jesus would be easy if it weren't for people. It's easy to love people I like. It's easy to be more generous, more caring, more forgiving with people I like. But the person who cuts me off in traffic or hurts my feelings or just gets under my skin. But do you know what Jesus once said? **If you love only those who love you, what reward to you have? Don't even the tax collectors do the same?** (Matthew 5:46) Tax collectors were the worst, most hurtful people they could imagine. Even they love the people they like. Jesus wants us to love the people who are difficult to love – that boss who didn't treat you well, your ex who cheated on you, that friend who stabbed you in the back and then spread rumors about you. Who is the most difficult person in your life to love? That's the person Jesus is actually calling you to love. And how do you do that? There's a story in Matthew's gospel where Jesus teaches his disciples about this.

From Galilee, Jesus went to the regions of Tyre and Sidon. Jesus and his disciples were leaving their homes in Galilee and the people they knew and loved and were headed to Tyre and Sidon. That was a region Jews didn't go. They were different people, not at all like them. **A Canaanite woman from those territories came out...** This is the only time the word "Canaanite" appears in the New Testament. It was a derogatory term – the way in today's political environment a Republican says liberal or a Democrat says conservative. **A Canaanite woman came out and shouted, "Show me mercy, Son of David. But Jesus didn't respond at all. Why not? What's that about? His disciples came and urged him, "Send her away; she keeps shouting out after us."** After all, she's a Canaanite. She's a bothersome, difficult

person, and we don't even need to be around her. **Jesus replied, "I've been sent only to the lost sheep, the people of Israel."** And she, of course, is not one of them. **But she knelt before him and said, "Lord, help me." He replied, "It is not good to take the children's bread and toss it to dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their master's table." Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith. It will be just as you wish." And right then her daughter was healed.** Anyone else confused by this story? Was Jesus just having a bad day? A needy woman approaches Jesus, asks for help and he ignores her and then insults her – calls her a "dog." How did this story even get into the Bible?! But if we look a little deeper, there's a reason this story is in the Bible. It offers an important lesson - five of them actually – that can help us learn how to love difficult people.

1. Silence your need to be nice. We know about Minnesota nice. Us Minnesotans are not just known for cold winters, hot dish, and sports teams that can't seem to win the big ones. We're nice. Not honest, but nice. When the Canaanite woman approached Jesus, he was silent. Nowhere in the Bible does it say, "Be nice." Nowhere does Jesus say, just try to be nice, because nice avoids the truth. Last January, I did a 360 evaluation. It was a voluntary evaluation that looked not at my job performance but my emotional intelligence and how I see myself and how others see me in social situations. And I invited family, friends, colleagues, and my boss to complete the evaluation and I also evaluated myself. When I got the results, they weren't bad, but they were not what I thought – and my first response: "They don't know me as well as I know me." But then I sat down with a psychologist to interpret the results and I learned things about myself that I didn't know – and just being nice wouldn't do that.

You can't love someone if you are just trying to be nice. You can't love someone if your goal is to get out of that moment or that conversation by being nice. Just smooth things over and avoid conflict – that's Minnesota nice. We don't have to be cruel or unkind, but if you want to love a difficult person, let go of being nice and instead, be authentic. Silence your need to be nice.

2. Avoid avoidance. So often when it comes to difficult people, the one thing we want to do is avoid – get away – you see that person in the room and you turn around and leave. In our story, Jesus is silent, but the disciples are not. They went to Jesus. They saw the woman. They didn't talk to the woman. They avoid her, and say to Jesus, "Can we get rid of her? Send her away." They won't even acknowledge her or talk to her. Do we? Do we avoid the hard conversation and steer clear of what make us uncomfortable? Have there been times when we've avoided eye contact thinking if we don't make eye contact – we can pretend they weren't even in the room. Avoidance.

But Jesus didn't do that. He doesn't avoid her. In first century Jewish culture, it was normal for a Jewish man to avoid a woman in public, especially a Gentile woman. It was the normal, right thing not to speak to her. But Jesus avoids avoidance. He speaks to her. He takes a risk because even though avoidance might feel better, it's a terrible way to deal with difficult people. Why? Because hard feelings build up inside, misunderstandings grow, we let our assumptions become reality. To love difficult people, we have to engage, have the hard conversation. We may have to apologize or ask for an apology. We may need to forgive and offer another chance. And you may need the help of a counselor or a pastor on how to take that next step.

3. Respect boundaries. The disciples went to Jesus and said, "Send her away." And what does Jesus say? **"I've been sent only to the lost sheep, the people of Israel."** Jesus didn't heal every sick person he ever met. He had a specific calling. Earlier in Matthew's gospel, he announces that he has come to reach the Jews so that they would go and eventually reach the Gentiles. Jesus had boundaries. He is saying, her problem is not my problem. In this series,

we've looked at boundaries – things we can control and the things we cannot control. And often we cross a property line in an effort to control what is not ours to control or we blame someone else. Someone cuts me off in traffic and I get made. The other driver was responsible for cutting me off, but I'm responsible for getting mad and how I respond.

Jesus sounds harsh – her problem is not my problem. But knowing that, he was free to engage. There's a freedom to love. I don't have to, but I choose to.

4. Confront prejudices. This is the hardest part of the story. The woman says, "Help me." And Jesus says, "It is not good to take children's bread and toss it to dogs." In the first century, dogs were not cute cuddly animals that you slept with – but dirty and unclean – and a first century Jew would look at a Canaanite woman and see a dirty, unclean dog – not fully human. And when Jesus said what he said, I can imagine all of the disciples shaking their heads in agreement. But Jesus was testing them. He was saying aloud what they were thinking. Nowhere in scripture does Jesus actually treat a woman this way. What Jesus came to do was to reach the lost sheep of Israel. He was testing – not the woman but the disciples who felt morally superior. They had judged her before they even saw her.

What if Jesus said what we were actually thinking about that difficult person in your life? What if he said what you thought? Would you agree? Or deny it? Would you be embarrassed? The hardest person for God to love in my life is me because God knows what's in here (heart). God knows my thoughts, my beliefs, my feelings, my choices, what I am capable of. The trust is I'm the most difficult person to love. And what does God say to us difficult people? I love you anyway. Two thousand years ago, Jesus died not just for people easy to love, but for people hardest to love. Jesus looked down from the cross to love and forgive the very people who put him there.

5. Ask God for help. To love that difficult person, you need something more than the strength to get up and do it. You will need all the help you can get. And here's the twist in the story. We learn this from the Canaanite woman. She is the one who gets on her knees, and says the most important words you can have in your life of faith: "Help me. Lord, help me." She even takes Jesus' words to the disciples and turns then back to Jesus: "Even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the Master's table." Jesus, I know you can do something, not because I deserve anything. I may be the most difficult person, but I know you can do what I cannot. Help me. And Jesus says, **Woman, you have great faith.** The Greek word for great is mega. She has mega-faith. Because in a moment when she could have walked away from what she thought were difficult people – just avoided them, she leaned in, she took courage, she said, "Lord, help me."

And that's the faith we need when it comes to difficult people. What we cannot do by ourselves, God is ready to do when we let God help us. And so this morning, I want to invite you to think about a difficult person in your life and with what we have learned from the Canaanite woman, let's pray:

God help me. God help me see them as you see them. God help me take the next step. Help me have the hard conversation. Help me love. Help me forgive. Help me do what seems impossible. God help me. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of October 14, 2018

Thirty Days of Prayer

Day 15: Monday, October 15

Scripture: Matthew 5:21-26

“You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, don't commit murder, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment. If they say to their brother or sister, ‘You idiot,’ they will be in danger of being condemned by the governing council. And if they say, ‘You fool,’ they will be in danger of fiery hell. Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go. First make things right with your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift. Be sure to make friends quickly with your opponents while you are with them on the way to court. Otherwise, they will haul you before the judge, the judge will turn you over to the officer of the court, and you will be thrown into prison. I say to you in all seriousness that you won't get out of there until you've paid the very last penny.

Prayer:

Almighty Lord, blessed is the day when I can come to you, opening my heart before you and asking that you help me examine my life. Help me this day, I pray, Lord, to understand anger. Things can happen between two people and before you know it there are words, feelings, emotions, division, and hurt. Each goes their own way. Victims of despair live in anguish that holds them inactive, eats at their faith, and hinders even their vision of you. Lord, help me understand that anger begins when I put myself first. Help me to put you first. Help me to put others second. Help me to put myself third. That is the only way to overcome anger. Amen.

Reflection/Action:

Forgiveness is at the center of reconciliation and the resolution of anger. Do I find it difficult to forgive? Do I find it difficult to accept forgiveness? Today, I will try to make the first steps toward reconciliation between myself and someone from whom I feel separated.

Day 16: Tuesday, October 16

Scripture: Romans 5:1-11

Therefore, since we have been made righteous through his faithfulness combined with our faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God's glory. But not only that! We even take pride in our problems, because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. This hope doesn't put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. While we were still weak, at the right moment, Christ died for ungodly people. It isn't often that someone will die for a righteous person, though maybe someone might dare to die for a good person. But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us. So, now that we have been made righteous by his blood, we can be even more certain that we will be saved from God's wrath through him. If we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son while we were still enemies, now that we have been reconciled, how much more certain is it that we will be saved by his life? And not only that: we even take pride in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, the one through whom we now have a restored relationship with God.

Prayer:

Eternal God, sometimes I get up in the morning with my whole day planned. Schedules, meetings, duties, responsibilities, friends, colleagues, intuition, insight, hunches, and luck, just to name a few of my plans. There are a lot of things that will influence me today. There are a lot of things that I will count on today, Lord. I will count on myself, others, even material things. I will count on these in times of stress, joy and celebration. I will seek persons to help, to join or to confirm me. Sometimes, I will even give up and try to start anew seeking some new plateau of security. What folly I seek. I know there is only One I should trust. You know where I have been. You know where I stand. And you know where I should go. Lead me, O God, and I will follow. Amen.

Reflection/Action:

People are funny about the things in which they place trust: cars, jobs and friends. We trust or have faith that nearly everything will work just as it has before. These are the things in which I have "faith"...

Day 17: Wednesday, October 17**Scripture: Luke 3:21-22**

When everyone was being baptized, Jesus also was baptized. While he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness."

Prayer:

Eternal Spirit, help me slow down. I find myself approaching you with the wrong attitude. I am saying to myself, "Now let's hurry up and get this over. I have so much to do." We are all busy people, and there is so much to do. But how good will the job be if I take the wrong tools to do it? I find myself rushing to you, sometimes not only with the questions but with the answers. Teach me to slow down and listen. Do not allow me to just bring you all my problems and then go away, tackling them myself. Help me understand that prayer is waiting in silence, expecting to hear your word. Dear Lord, come into my life and make a difference. Make a difference in my response to all the opportunities you place before me this day. Amen.

Reflection/Action:

Life is a rush; I need to slow down and listen. I find myself answering another person's question even before they have finished asking. Sometimes I even do this with God. As Jesus prayed, God's Spirit descended on him. In my waiting and listening, I will try to let God's Spirit descend upon me today.

Day 18: Thursday, October 18**Scripture: Luke 18:9-14**

Jesus told this parable to certain people who had convinced themselves that they were righteous and who looked on everyone else with disgust: "Two people went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, 'God, I thank you that I'm not like everyone else—crooks, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, 'God, show mercy to me, a sinner.' I tell you, this

person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up."

Prayer:

Dear Lord, in whom or what do I place my trust? In all honesty, I know my answer should be You, but it's not that easy. I worry about security, a financial guarantee that would protect me and provide for everything I need and want. At times I think about it and plan. Most of the time it is not a threat that demands my attention. As I read and reflect on the words of scripture, I realize that real security is called faith in Jesus Christ. It does not suffer inflation or devaluation. It does not rust, and thieves cannot break in and steal it. It does not give one a false sense of self-valuation. But it brings us humbly to our knees saying: "Thank you, Lord, for your Son." Amen.

Reflection/Action:

When I feel insecure, I believe that there is nothing in which I can place trust. However, when I come face to face with God, who is the ultimate in trust, love and power, I find that God can give me all the security I will ever need. When was the last time I shared that sense of security with another person?

Day 19: Friday, October 19

Scripture: Joel 2:27-29

You will know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the LORD your God—no other exists; never again will my people be put to shame. After that I will pour out my spirit upon everyone; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. In those days, I will also pour out my spirit on the male and female slaves.

Prayer:

Lord God, there is a saying, "Hitch your wagon to a star." I once heard someone add, "The star that shone over the manger." In other words, set your sights on God, go with God, and God will go with you. God, how can I develop a lifestyle that reflects a close relationship with you? What can I do to enhance my life, as well as represent you to those I meet? Much of my life is spent making decisions. Could I daydream a moment longer over each decision and ask, "Does this hook up with your star?" Let me daydream ways to be your disciple. Lord, let your star shine so brightly in my life that I will constantly seek to hook every part of my life to it. For it is in Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Reflection/Action:

Dreaming and daydreaming can be a method by which God communicates to me. As I go about my daily tasks I need to ask, "Is this of God?" How could my lifestyle make me conscious of God's presence in my life?

Day 20: Saturday, October 20

Scripture: Matthew 5:38-42

"You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well. When they wish to haul you to court and take your shirt, let them have your coat too. When they force you to go one mile, go with them two. Give to those who ask, and don't refuse those who wish to borrow from you.

Prayer:

Lord, who will I meet today? Will I be ready to recognize you when I see you? How many times in my life have I been asked for food and money, shelter and guidance, care and love, truth and faith? What has been my answer? How have I met the challenge? Lord, have I gazed into your eyes when I have looked the beggar in the face, wiped away the tears of someone who is hurting, spoken to a confused youth, shared with my own children? Lord, have I turned my back on you? Help me use my life as a witness to the love and the life of Jesus, as I try to answer the needs of those around me. Amen.

Reflection/Action:

What would I give away? I can give away whatever special gift God has given me – money, time, special talent, care and love. I wonder, what would that do for my faith?