

I invite you to take just a moment, and think of a time when you were wrong about someone.

Notice I didn't ask *if* you can think of a time like that – *if* you made an assumption about a person based on a first impression, or something you heard about them, or something your grandmother once said about people who look the way that person looks or are from where that person is from, and it turned out you were wrong.

I didn't say *if* because at one time or another we *all* have been wrong about someone. Being wrong about people is an inevitable consequence of a skill all of us humans develop as we grow up and move around in the world. We simply don't have time to do a deep dive with every person we meet. So we learn to size them up quickly. To look for and recognize certain cues, conscious and unconscious. And draw conclusions from them.

I see a man walking down the street dressed in a certain style, moving a particular way. My brain instantly processes that information, and makes educated guesses about his age, socio-economic class, health, gender orientation, maybe even the quality of person he is. Because I trust the data I've already filed in here (gesture to head). I might not be absolutely correct – but chances are I'll be somewhere in the neighborhood.

If you are seeing me preach for the first time, you'll notice I'm a white woman of a certain age who stands up fairly straight, smiles a lot, speaks pretty clearly, sometimes uses big words – and already you've sized me up! Warm. Good energy. Credible (hopefully). And you will trust your assessment. It is a totally normal process. We all do it.

The problem is, sometimes yours and my educated guesses are not accurate. And theoretically, because we are better off being right than being wrong about the people we come into contact with, when it turns out that what we have guessed is not true, we incorporate that new data. And update our files. And if necessary, revise our set of assumptions.

In his classic book *The Road Less Traveled*, first published in 1978, M. Scott Peck talks about this cycle of revision as one of an essential set of tools that helps us to solve problems. In the section headed "Dedication to Reality", Peck says that the more clearly you and I can see what's really true, the better we are equipped to deal with it. Our view of reality works kind of like a map that helps us negotiate the terrain of our lives.

By extension, I would say, the more clearly we see other people, the more able we are to recognize and receive what they have to offer us. Sometimes what they are bringing

will delight us, and sometimes it will challenge us. Either way, it's more data for our files. More data that helps us know what's really true.

Now, when we are wrong about someone, the process of realizing that, incorporating this new data and revising our maps – that process takes effort. Especially when it entails questioning, and possibly throwing out, long held beliefs; beliefs acquired from those who have influenced us or from our own experience.

Sometimes the scope of implied revision feels so overwhelming that we avoid it. Or worse, double down on being wrong. Because otherwise, a whole lot of dominoes are going to fall behind this one. If I'm wrong about this person, we think, that means I'm probably wrong about others like them. Maybe a lot of others. And much as I hate to say it, it kind of looks like that's what Jesus did, at least at first, in his encounter with the Canaanite woman that Matthew describes in today's Gospel.

Now, this idea that Jesus could be wrong about a person flies in the face of significant long-held assumptions about who he is and what he is or isn't capable of. And trust me when I tell you, commentators have struggled, big time, to find other ways to interpret how he treats her and what he says to her.

They point out that Jesus was a faithful Jew. As were most of Matthew's first hearers. Treating this woman the way he does would not have troubled them. First, because of where the encounter takes place – Tyre and Sidon are, and I quote, "a Gentile region where prudent Jews do not walk alone." Centuries of racism, and violence, and bigotry. will color any encounter between them in that neck of the woods. Second, because good Jewish men don't have anything to do with foreign women who don't know how to behave. And when one makes such a spectacle of herself, by brazenly coming toward you and shouting your name, even if she is asking for mercy? Best to ignore her, and hope she will give up and go away. And if that doesn't work – sure, it's okay to call her a dog. It was a favorite Jewish epithet for Canaanites.

So, some commentators conclude, Jesus is behaving in a way that is "normal". And maybe (and here's the part where I need to take a deep breath), maybe he is testing her! Setting her up, so that she can be an exemplar of what faith looks like when you don't belong. Or when God seems to not be paying attention. Jesus isn't wrong about her. It's all part of his grand strategy.

Now, obviously, we can't know what was going through Jesus' mind. But I think it is legitimate to wonder whether this is, rather, a prime example of his normal human assumptions being seriously messed with. By an encounter with an iconic character who basically makes it impossible for Jesus to push her aside.

She will not give up. She is insisting that he take her into account. This mother who is advocating for her child, who is appealing to Jesus' compassion. She is offering him the opportunity to re-evaluate his working assumptions. To expand his vision of his mission. To add a whole new continent to his map.

By being willing, as she suggests she is, to take what might be left over. To gather up just a few crumbs. Not quite realizing that in so doing, she is proposing a feast. A feast where everyone has a seat at the table. Where everyone receives the gift of God's promise, and the hope of God's salvation. Everyone is eligible for God's healing. Everyone is worthy of God's wholeness.

So I think it's okay to say that Jesus was wrong about her! And if, as I suggested earlier, he doubled down initially because he had a sense that this domino was a really big one, and there would be so many more that would fall behind it, he would have been right. By the time Matthew was fitting this story into his account of the good news of who Jesus was, and what he said and did, the impacts of those falling dominos were being felt far and wide. Matthew's community, itself, was trying to figure out how to not regard their believing Gentile brethren as foreigners who did not belong in the Jesus movement. They were trying to figure out how to revise their maps.

And it's a struggle that has recurred over and over again in the life of the church. Throughout the decades and the centuries faithful believers have been wrong about people. Simply because they are human. We've been wrong about individuals and groups who have shouted out to us. Who have challenged us to receive their witness. Who have beseeched us to incorporate new data. To update our maps.

This story of the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman assures us that Jesus joins us in our humanity. Which means he also joins us in our limitation. He joins us in our ongoing struggle to be open to new data. And he shows us that even when we are wrong about people; when we act out of assumptions that need to be revised and behave in ways that we later regret, we can repent, and learn, and grow.

And if we are lucky, the very ones we have been wrong about will have mercy on us, and still bestow upon us their gifts. So that we can take the next step in understanding what is really true. What is really true about ourselves, and about one another; about the graciousness of God, and the expansiveness of God's love.