

Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us

Next week, the U.S. Open Tennis Championships begin in New York. My family and I always enjoy watching the matches on TV, and every year, I vow that next summer, I will be there in person to catch all the action. So maybe next summer...

Another person who also won't be attending the U.S. Open this year is legendary American tennis player Serena Williams. Serena has won the U.S. Open singles title six times, as part of her record-breaking 23 Grand Slam singles titles. She was the most dominant women's player in a professional career that spanned over 25 years until her retirement after last year's U.S. Open, ranking as the world's number one player for 319 weeks, including a record 186 consecutive weeks.

Serena is widely recognized as having broken tennis conventions since the very beginning of her career as one of the only African-American women playing professionally, proudly showing off her muscular physique, traditional African American hairstyles, and unique, colorful fashions on the court.

At various points throughout her career, Serena's natural gifts and style were criticized as "not the way things are done" or "not appropriate for this venue." But with talent, hard work, and a commitment to being her authentic self, she became a legendary sports icon who is credited with inspiring new generations of players.

Conventions are those unwritten rules and norms that govern the countless behaviors all of us engage in every day without necessarily thinking about them. Some everyday social conventions include shaking hands when greeting someone, or making eye contact during a conversation.

Particular groups of people also have conventions. Athletes, for example, often "high-five" with teammates when goals are scored, and shake hands with their opponents after a game. The Episcopal Church certainly has its share of conventions, such as the wearing of certain styles of vestments or being mindful to not sit in someone else's pew during services.

Conventions give us rules and make us feel safe, and they help us know what to do in various situations. We follow them because we often just want to fit in. As trivial as social conventions may seem, they can be very difficult to go against. Conventions too often involve how the world is telling us to behave or think. Conventions may keep us from exploring new ways of doing things, new ways of thinking, and even new ways of approaching God and each other.

Today's Gospel reading illustrates the power of conventions and the great things that can happen if we don't let them stand in our way. Jesus and the disciples are traveling from Gennesaret, which was on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, to Tyre and Sidon, which were border towns on the north side and centers of non-Jewish (that is, Gentile) culture.

Word of Jesus' healing powers had already spread around the region (ref. Matthew 14:34), and crowds of people began to follow him, hoping to touch, as the chapter before today's reading describes, "even the fringe of his cloak" as they sought healing.

It was this crowd of believers that, earlier in his ministry journey, Jesus preached to in the sermon the mount (ref. Matthew 5). It is also this crowd of early believers that he will miraculously feed from the five loaves of bread and two fishes, as described later in this chapter (ref. Matthew 15:33).

And it is perhaps because of all the crowds and attention that Jesus was attracting that he continued from town to town and finally reached the far end of Galilee, in search of a respite.

It is near Tyre and Sidon that, despite his attempts to withdraw from the crowds, that a Canaanite woman finds him and speaks to him. No, not speaks - shouts. Just in this action, she's breaking several social conventions.

One, it was not customary for an unescorted woman to be in public much less speak to men. Two, it was not customary for different ethnic groups to speak so openly to each other. Three, it wasn't then, nor is it now, conventional for anyone to just walk up and start shouting at a stranger.

It is clear that the woman is motivated to break convention and speak to Jesus for one reason: because of her love for her daughter, who is tormented by a demon. The Canaanite woman too had heard, and had come to believe, all the talk about this man who could heal.

She probably wondered: surely breaking convention would be worth any embarrassment or other consequences, as long as it led to complete healing for her daughter.

In encountering the woman, Jesus saw an opportunity to further educate the disciples about his mission and purpose on earth. Often he had tried to teach them using parables - like he just did describing the blind leading the blind - but just as often, the disciples had a difficult time grasping the true Gospel message. In writing about this passage, one writer called the disciples “clueless and dimwitted”.

Now, Jesus realizes he had the chance to teach them with a moment happening right in front of their eyes. He pretends to fall back on the Jewish convention of not engaging with unknown women, and doesn't answer her. The woman doesn't give up, however, but pleads with him until the disciples have heard enough and beg Jesus to send her away, “for she keeps shouting after us.”

Still in teacher mode, Jesus tries to dismiss her with his assertion that his saving grace is only intended for the Jewish people - that is, the house of Israel - and not the Gentiles. She should therefore have no expectation of His help.

The woman persists in her request, further demonstrating her faith in Jesus as the Messiah by kneeling before him. She acknowledges to Jesus that she understands his ministry may be intended for the Jews but that she also knows there is plenty of spiritual food available for her and others: “yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.”

Seeing her demonstration of love and conviction, Jesus acknowledges her faith—calling it “great” - and grants her request, healing her daughter instantly. In doing so, he makes it clear to the disciples that his ministry is for the entire world, is not confined to the Jewish community, and is certainly not dictated by traditional conventions like dietary laws or the washing of hands.

Jesus' ministry and the response to it is only governed by true faith, that is, what is in the heart. Followers of Jesus must adopt new conventions by living lives of truth, trust, and selflessness. Followers of Jesus must look beyond the world's arbitrary rules of boundaries and discrimination, and see how they too can be ministers of healing to a tormented world.

Conventions may help us feel safe and know the protocols for things but they can also prevent us from doing truly meaningful things. In fact, Jesus' ministry on earth was all about bucking conventions.

Jesus defied convention when he healed the crippled man on the sabbath (ref. John 5:1-18) and incurred the wrath of the "Sabbath police"; the man had been unable to walk for 38 years, and Jesus didn't think he should have to suffer one minute longer. If that meant breaking sabbath rules - so be it.

Jesus resisted convention when he overturned the tables of the money changers and merchants in the Temple (ref. Matthew 21:12-13). He didn't think that a place of prayer should be turned into a marketplace, even though it had been used in that way for some time.

Jesus also went against convention when he washed the disciples' feet on the eve of his arrest and crucifixion, something they never thought the king of kings would ever do; but in doing so, Jesus demonstrated how we are all called to love and serve each other.

This year, Serena and I will both be watching the U.S. Open from the comfort of our living rooms. She will be watching players like Coco Gauff, who as a young girl was inspired by Serena's example of upending convention about what a tennis player should look like and play like. I will be watching these same players, in awe of their athleticism and agility, and wondering how I too might help and inspire others by bucking convention.

May we all consider the conventions we follow, and the new conventions of love, service, and healing that Jesus calls us to. May we always be aware of opportunities to break convention if it helps us better serve our communities and each other, and may we hear the shouts of those calling out to us to do so.
Amen.