

Crumbs of Grace
PPC
Pentecost 11A
16 August 2020

Psalm 133
Matthew 15:10-28

Jesus' attitude and language in his encounter with the Canaanite woman is shocking. She is simply seeking deliverance for her demon-possessed daughter and yet he calls her a dog - a name that his fellow Jews routinely gave to Gentile pagans.

We can acknowledge that for this time, this woman's behavior is unacceptable. Her culture expects women to be reserved in public. She violates all social norms by shouting at him from across the square. Her shouting makes demands of him. No wonder that at first Jesus makes no response. His disciples call on him to send this woman away. The group of Jesus and his disciples may be walking cautiously through this town as they are now in alien land. They have left Judah and are back again in the north, a region northwest of the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The pharisees and scribes have followed him and have been questioning him. Jesus is answering their question about defilement when this woman comes bursting out of the crowd in her rude and loud manner. Among this crowd there was probably concern of being set upon by the Canaanites who were hostile toward Jews, remembering their history together. These are ancient foes, idol-worshipping enemies over against whom the people of Israel defined themselves.

This woman (who is unnamed) is shouting, "*Kyrie Elieson*" or "Lord, have mercy." Interestingly, she also uses the phrase "son of David," an acknowledgment, perhaps, that she understands something of the Jewish faith and belief. Jesus understood his mission was to bring God's word to the Jews. Earlier in Matthew, as Jesus has sent out the disciples to preach and teach, he clearly says to them "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matt. 10:5b-6). Now, they are confronted by a Ca-

naanite woman who gets right into their faces. Clearly, Jesus is not taking the initiative for a mission to the Gentiles; rather, a Gentile woman takes the initiative to encounter Jesus. Isn't this what faith is?

This story may be hard to hear for this isn't a Jesus we are accustomed to hearing about. The Canaanite woman is unclean, having eaten those foods that makes one ritually unclean. She is the alien, the immigrant, the poor fat woman who sits on the curbside daily, only to be ignored by the more prosperous passers-by. The disciples certainly don't want Jesus talking to her. Can't you see them? As they look at one another, they are whispering to themselves, "She's coming over here, oh no, she's talking to us, what are we going to do? She's crazy! C'mon, Jesus, let's get out of here. We don't want to start trouble."

This woman is not put off by the first response, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). She is not ready to give up. Does her persistence intrigue Jesus? According to social convention, he would have been perfectly within his rights to continue to ignore her and move away.

The Canaanite woman doesn't give up. She pleads with him, "Help me." Here, we think, now Jesus will listen to her. Instead he calls her a dog "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This was a routine epithet often hurled at the Gentiles. Like a dog whistle today that addresses suburban women who don't want low income housing to be in their neighborhoods. We don't expect these words to be ones that Jesus would use.

He has just lectured and chastised the official keepers of Jewish tradition for having squeezed the life and liveliness out of their tradition. What is happening here?

This woman will not give up. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs thrown from the master's table." She is an excellent litigator!

It is probable that Matthew, who was writing to the church of his place and his day, needed to address the issue of the blending of the Jews and Gentiles. What could he say to those who were raised within the strictures of Jewish culture and those who were excluded precisely because of that tradition. Echoes of that conversation between Jesus and the authorities still ring out in today's church. Jesus mocks the religious leaders because they have used tradition in perverse ways to contravene the will of God. That's a conversation that continues in the 21st century church. Who do we keep out of the church today?

The tension that arises with the non-response of Jesus is huge. This is not what we, contemporary readers, have come to expect of Jesus. When he calls this woman a racial epithet, we are stunned. Taken as a realistic report, this story raises harsh and difficult questions. Why is Jesus so offensive to this woman? Does she finally best him in a test of language skills? How does a Gentile woman come to have faith in Jesus as "the son of David?" What happens to this woman after her daughter is healed? Is she now a disciple? Does she participate in a Christian community? If this is a test Jesus is giving, it adds more offense to the story. Only a cruel teacher uses the student as an object lesson. Is it really important whether or not this story actually happened? After all, the woman emerges from the story and disappears again into it.

"Kyrie eleison" cries out this woman. The key to this story is the *mercy* that the woman seeks for herself and her daughter. Although she is not a Judean, she clearly knows a good deal about Jesus and his reputation as a healer. She cries out for mercy to this "son of David."

Lord, have mercy is a prayer that continues down through the centuries. It is chanted in cloisters, whispered in hospitals, screamed out on the battlefields. How many black men have we heard make this plea as a knee placed on their necks, or a bullet sent whistling through the air has

taken their lives? It is the cry of the soul as it faces the depth of misery of the human condition. In spite of Jesus' seeming indifference to this cry, the woman keeps shouting.

“Her confidence does have solid grounds,” writes one commentator, “for mercy, which is what she craves, is, according to Matthew, absolutely central to Jesus' ministry.”¹ Jesus quotes Hosea twice in his replies to the Pharisees over questions having to do with purity and obedience to the law of God. “I desire mercy not sacrifice” (Matt. 9:13, 12:7).

Why is Jesus putting this obstacle in the way of her quest for mercy? It seems that he is saying that the doctrine of the election of Israel - a doctrine that, in the hands of the religious leaders who are so critical of him, has become one of favoritism, exclusion, and contempt - means that she cannot receive mercy. This woman seems to understand that perhaps mercy is reserved for the elect and she doesn't object to that. Her hope, however, arises from the fact that “even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.” And, she also sees that the fundamental basis of election is God's decision to be a merciful God. “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion” (Exod. 33:19, Rom. 9:15). This is the way that God has determined to be God - through mercy.

Jesus, who understands what mercy is, commends this woman in the end for her great faith. We are challenged by Matthew to address our false assumptions about the meaning of faith itself. Anne Lamont writes that there are only two prayers: Thank you, God and Help me, God.

It's interesting that this interchange takes place in a setting of “behind the enemy lines.” Jesus and his disciples are not walking through a friendly crowd. The authorities are so concerned with the rules and Jesus calls them to re-frame those rules. Is it possible that Jesus is enacting the parable of what he has just argued? He is traveling into “unwashed territory” that tra-

¹ *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 3*, Proper 15, Matthew 15: (1-10) 21-28, Iwan Russell-Jones, pg. 358.

dition considers a “toxic waste area.” How many of those places exist today in our cultural view of the world? What would it mean for the church to follow Jesus into the “toxic waste areas” of the world today?

I learned a really important lesson when I was in high school. It was traditional for our church youth group to travel to another city to spend a week working for “the poor.” One summer, we journeyed to St. Louis. We were to help do clean up and painting tasks at the large lower income housing high rises. There we were, a group of White kids from a wealthy suburb, emerging onto foreign soil, ready to “help” these people. (This high rise project, by the way, when it was built a decade earlier, had lured women with their children into the project. Social workers, however, had made it clear that men were not welcomed. They encouraged family units to break up in exchange for indoor plumbing.) As we got off our bus, we began to be pelted by stones and rocks. Quickly, we were shepherded back onto the bus and our plans for the week were set aside.

We judged this to be a “toxic waste” area. Was it? Had we been invited by the community members or by a fellow White church? A woman did not emerge from the crowd asking us for mercy. In retrospect, our group should have been the ones asking for mercy. White supremacy had created this environment. Are we surprised that large communities of Black people are now rising up? How would you respond to Breonna Taylor’s mother if she insisted that you do something? Could you promise her that justice will be done?

This story of the Canaanite woman is one of my favorite biblical tales. We are brought up short when we recognize the doctrine of election as being one of mercy. We assume that we are the elect, we White Americans. How well have we loved our neighbor, the one who is different, the one who is excluded? Aren’t we continually struggling with this God of mercy. If your child was killed under the knee of a spiteful policeman, would you think that mercy had been shown?

How will this struggle change the way we see others - those whom we place in the toxic waste areas?

While I recognize that in this time of a pandemic it is not viable to work outside our boundaries right now, what could we be doing to make a difference? How will we be enticed to leave our buildings and act in the world as reconciling agents of God? Being inclusive means looking outward, beyond our safe and comfortable lives. The Canaanite woman leads the way. Shall we follow her?