

Who will be at the Table?

Preached on the Second Sunday in Lent
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Feb. 28, 2021
Text: Matt. 15: 21-28

In the New Testament story we read this morning, we encounter a side of Jesus that affronts our modern sensibilities and certainly our political correctness. The words Jesus uses in his exchange with the Canaanite woman are not ones we expect from his mouth.

Let's look at the story and its setting as Matthew describes it. Jesus has been teaching and walking across the country followed by large crowds. He has healed the sick, forgiven sins and challenged the established thinking on God. He has just had a debate with the scribes and Pharisees about what truly defiles a person. It is not omitting to wash your hands and then eating; it is not even the wrong foods. It is what resides in the heart—murder, adultery, false witness, slander—that defiles a person. Yet the religious authorities focus only on what goes into a person, not what comes out of a sinful heart. Hence, these authorities are “blind guides”, according to Jesus.

Then Jesus and his disciples move north out of Israel into what we know today as Lebanon, containing the ancient cities of Tyre and Sidon. Mark's version of this story has Jesus staying at someone's home and trying to keep this a secret. He is probably tired and needs some rest. In Matthew that detail is not included, and we just have Jesus entering this largely Gentile region, probably followed only by his disciples. Immediately a woman accosts him, not with a polite request, but with crying and pleading. Now Mark refers to her as “a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth”, but Matthew refers to her as a Canaanite, a word carrying a lot of Jewish bigotry. So she is not of the house of Israel; not one of the people of the covenant, but an outsider and apostate, even someone “unclean”. Matthew could be using this particular negative word because he knows what it is to be an outsider, one who, like other tax collectors, has been ostracized for his impiety.

Yet, as he portrays her, this woman seems to have genuine faith. She must have heard about Jesus even before he entered her city because she was ready. What she heard about him, she believed. She is not a Jew, yet she is using language that is familiar only to Jews of the time. She calls him “Son of David.” She is absolutely certain that Jesus is who he says he is. Unlike his own people, who doubt him and try to trip him at every conversation, she believes that he alone has the power to heal her little daughter. And because she loves her daughter she will beg, and even shout until his power gives her what she wants: the healing of her child.

In her pleading, she asks first for mercy and then for healing. Apparently Jesus keeps on walking, but she follows. She doesn't give up. Jesus, however, is silent. Even

his disciples, embarrassed at her cries, ask him to send her away. They, too, are certain that because she is not a Jew, she has no right to ask him for anything.

Now Jesus finally says “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” As far as anyone knew, this had always been his mission. And he had worked at it every moment of every day. He had come to bring his people back to God.

The woman hears his words, but she seems undeterred by national and religious differences. She kneels before the Lord and pleads, “Lord, help me.” This woman is persistent, beyond all bounds of propriety. It was rare for a woman to address a Jewish Rabbi publicly, let alone a Gentile woman. That would demean the prestige of the Rabbi. The woman crossed every cultural line to achieve her aim. That was surely one reason why the disciples wanted Jesus to dismiss her. But this is a woman who is desperate. She is kneeling before the Lord with the empty hands of faith. She knows she has no status, nothing to offer that will impress him. This abject begging is all she has left.

Yet, in her hour of need, Jesus responds with what appears to us the height of disregard, even cruelty. “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” Now this was typical Jewish thinking. Jews were children at the table and Gentiles were dogs. Dogs, who were generally wild, do not have a good reputation in the Bible. They are scavengers, feeding on death. Dogs eat flesh and lap up blood. They are greedy, constantly hungry for more (Isaiah 56:11). They tear things to pieces (Matthew 7:6). In short, they are dangerous and not “man’s best friend.” The dog was a symbol of dishonor and shamelessness in New Testament times, often used to refer to a wayward woman. More generally, in places such as Revelation 22:15, those who were shut out of the kingdom of God are referred to as dogs.

The mother, however, does not budge. Most of us, no doubt, would walk away, thinking that what we always suspected in our darker moments was true: God has his favorites—and I’m not one of them. But remarkably, the woman accepts this designation. She knows she is an outsider; one to be avoided; one not invited to dine with the Lord. “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters’ table.” This poor outsider understands that God’s mercy is so great that even the tiny bit that escapes from the chosen ones is enough for sustenance. Jesus responds to her with admiration: “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” (v. 28) and her daughter was healed instantly.

There has been much written about this passage, some of it casting doubt on Jesus’s unique relationship with the Father. Our theologically liberal friends often see this story as revealing Jesus’s “growth” in understanding about his mission. After all, he was raised with Jewish prejudices and so is naturally going to look down on Gentiles as idolaters and as unclean “dogs.” Then, when faced with the faith of this pagan, we are told that his heart softens, he has an epiphany, and realizes that God’s mercy extends to everyone.

This view certainly conflicts with the orthodox view that Jesus knows the Father intimately and shares his Heart and very nature. Are we to believe that *this* Jesus is only vaguely aware of his purpose on earth? Furthermore, if Jesus is still trapped in cultural

prejudice, why does he head into Gentile lands in the first place? Could he find nowhere to rest and recuperate farther south? Perhaps. But maybe we should see his little excursion into pagan territory as more than a vacation interrupted. Maybe Jesus already knows what he wants to do and this encounter with the woman is primarily for the benefit of his disciples—and for us.

First of all, let us examine more closely what Jesus says. The word he uses for “dogs” is a diminutive, better translated “little dogs” or even “pet dogs”, something more characteristic of households in the area they are visiting. And this is important. It places those currently outside the covenant within the household. They are not “wild” and beyond all hope. They are at least near the table and not despised. Jesus is explaining his current ministry in a way that both the woman and the watching disciples can understand. His first duty is to the lost sheep of Israel, not to the Gentiles. Recklessly taking His attention from Israel, in violation of His mission, would be like a father taking food from his children in order to throw it to their pets. Jesus wasn’t referring to the Canaanite woman as a “wild dog,” either directly or indirectly. He wasn’t using an epithet or racial slur but making a point about the priorities he’d been given by God. He was also testing the faith of the woman and teaching his disciples a couple of important lessons.

First, true faith in God does not hold back, nor is it a half-measure along the lines of “it couldn’t hurt”. True faith is not evidenced by the occasional prayer thrown up as an aid request to a distant father with whom you hardly have a relationship. Nor should it be an onerous duty that you cannot wait to get through. None of us would like to be on the receiving end of that—nor does God. Rather, he wants our praying to be frequent and heartfelt. He wants us to get to know him, and in doing so, get to know ourselves. Continual prayer changes us, helping us grow in our understanding of God and in our understanding of our own need and spiritual poverty. If we don’t have our hearts softened by the Lord and instead remain in our rebellious state, then his answering our immature and unwise prayers is not going to do us any good, and could actually hurt us. Rather, we must always pray believing that God is good; endeavoring to be transparent and humble before Him; being fervent and persistent, just like the woman in our passage. She brings to mind Jacob, who wrestled with the angel all night and wouldn’t let go until he had received a blessing. She did receive what she asked for because her faith was real and she didn’t treat God as her Plan B.

Second, Jesus was revealing to his disciples God’s ultimate plan for the redemption of *all* people. He had planned all along to heal this woman’s daughter. He was not slowly “awakening” to the universal nature of his mission. God’s plan had always been to bless all nations through the progeny of Abraham, and Jesus knew this. He also knew how ethnocentric his countrymen could be. When he had earlier acknowledged God’s care for those outside the covenant, his townspeople were so angry they tried to throw him off a cliff! But perhaps the most important indicator of the true scope of his mission is that both times Jesus praises someone’s faith in the New Testament, it is the faith of a Gentile, not a Jew. And both of these events are immortalized in our liturgy. Echoing the centurion, we say in the *Agnus Dei* “Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof, but speak the word only, and my soul shall be healed.” And,

remembering the humility of the Syrophenecian woman, we say in the Prayer of Humble Access, “We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table.” These people had faith that even Jesus marveled at.

God wants his people to love him with their whole hearts and draw ever nearer to him. He calls *all* of us, not just those of a certain ethnicity or race. And he desires that we be *at* his table, not under it. Therefore, let this Lent be a time when we continue to cultivate the humility and love of those who will one day sit at his banquet table.

In the Name...