

Jesus and the Canaanite Woman: Matthew 15: 21-28

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Steve Davis, GCBC Pastoral Intern

So...I love dogs. I know many of you do to. Sarah Anne and I would love to get a dog though our rental situation right now makes it impossible. Dogs can be good emotional therapy both because they are emotionally sensitive creatures but also because caring for one encourages you to get out of your head and interacting with a living creature. Vancouver, as a city, also loves dogs for the most part, when it can move beyond the dog as lifestyle accessory problem of some dog owners. But for all this to call someone a dog is not a nice thing to do. In the context of the 1st Century it was quite a bit worse. Dogs were mostly street dogs, scavengers, not pleasant and not exactly clean. They did not just come fresh from the groomers. No, quite literally unclean, dogs became for the Jewish mind an appropriate image of the unclean status of the Gentile. So it became an actual practice for some Jewish sects such as the Pharisees to refer to the Gentiles as dogs.

This make today's scripture passage a difficult one. Though it is a small story it might be counted among the biblical passages that make us feel uncomfortable enough that we feel we need to just explain it away or smooth it over. But this is our story for today and what's more, this sermon series is about Jesus' encounters with individual people so we can't escape the fact that this interchange seems so harsh, so personally dismissive. So what might be going on in a story where Jesus calls someone a dog, not directly, but unmistakably?

I think the first thing to say clearly is that the reason we feel so uncomfortable with Jesus' treatment of her is that it doesn't sound like the Jesus we have come to know. Through numerous other gospel stories, some of which we have heard this summer, we know a Jesus who is quick to heal anyone and

who is gentle with those in need. We know a Jesus who crosses lines of division and creates welcome wherever he goes. He has already in Matthew's gospel healed the servant of a Gentile, the Centurion in chapter 8. And in chapter 9 he healed the woman who had been bleeding for years and raised the girl who was dead or asleep back to life. And this, this is the Jesus that we know, the Jesus that we love and the Jesus that we wish to follow more fully and deeply.

Israel meant to be a Blessing

In order to get a sense of what might be happening in this little story we need to begin for a moment with a wide-angle view of the story of scripture. That will help us learn something about a Jewish religious sect called the Pharisees. The Pharisees play an important part in the book of Matthew and in our story.

God founded, directed and called Israel to be a different kind of society, a different kind of nation from those that surrounded it. In this way it was to be a blessing to everyone, both a blessing to those inside Israel and also a blessing to those outside Israel. God intended for Israel to be set apart in the way it organized its common life, politically and economically. God intended Israel to be a just society and this justice was a large part of how it was to worship God. The books of the law and the prophets make clear that justice and the ritual life of worship were supposed to go together. This life-encompassing and life-bringing worship of God would result in Israel being a light and a blessing to the nations.

In order for this vision of Israel to work in practice, it was important to make distinctions, to draw lines between Israel and the nations in order to preserve the difference of justice. At the same time it is clear that these lines between Israel and the nations were there on behalf of those nations. It is also clear from the biblical story that these lines and distinctions were not immovable or uncrossable. Instead they

were porous lines which means that individuals and families could enter in. All the way along in the biblical story Gentiles were grafted into the Jewish people becoming a part of the people of God.

Matthew's own telling of the genealogy of Jesus includes the names of Ruth, and Rahab, two Gentile women that became part of Jesus' own family line through their faithful action.

So, to summarize, for Israel to be a blessing to the nations it had to maintain a distinctiveness of a just common life and worship over-against the surrounding nations. But it also had to understand that this distinctiveness was meant to be a blessing for those nations. If Israel lost its distinctiveness becoming just like the other nations or if it got caught up in an inward-looking preoccupation with racial and ritual purity then it would fail to be a blessing to those outside it.

We know that the majority of the time Israel did fail to be a blessing in one or sometimes both of these ways. With power-politics and an oppressive economic life, the common life of Israel came to look life everyone else. And sometimes with a violent and exclusionary concern for racial purity, Israel forgot that it was meant to be a blessing to others at all.

Question #1: How or where does our worship as individuals and as a community get separated from a different and just way of living?

Listen to Isaiah 58: 6-9. This passage sums up what we've been talking about: holding together justice and the ritual life of worship.

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice

and untie the cords of the yoke,

to set the oppressed free

and break every yoke?

7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—

when you see the naked, to clothe them,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,

and your healing will quickly appear;

then your righteousness[a] will go before you,

and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

9 Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;

you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

The Pharisees

Coming back to the book of Matthew we learn in the first part of chapter 15 that Jesus has quite a sharp interchange with the Pharisees. And this interchange helps explain what is going on in our story.

The Pharisees were a Jewish religious sect that came into power and influence a little before Jesus' time. They knew the same biblical story we do but missed the heart and the purpose of being set apart. They did not read Isaiah very well. They rightly interpreted the exodus and the occupation of Israel by foreign forces, such as the Roman's in Jesus' time, as a judgment of Israel. But instead of understanding that the judgment fell on Israel because of its injustice, the Pharisees thought that the judgment was because of the pollution of Israel's racial and ritual purity. So, they reasoned if Israel was able to live with ritual purity before God and maintain its racial purity as well, then God would bless them again with freedom and power. If the Pharisees thought at all about being a blessing or a

light to the nation, and some of them probably did, they thought that would come only from an exercise of Israel's political freedom and power.

Question #2: Where might we be like the Pharisees holding tightly to lines of division and difference?

The 1st Part of chapter 15

So in the first section of chapter 15, the Pharisees come to him accusing his disciples of not exercising ritual purity, particularly by not washing their hands before eating. Jesus doesn't answer them about that but instead responds with an accusation of his own, saying, "Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition." The tradition of the Pharisees included a loophole that allowed people to not provide for their parents in old age by saying that the money they would have used for that is given instead to God. Jesus calls them out on this, saying that they were encouraging people to dishonour their parents which is in strict disobedience of the Ten Commandments. He even quotes Isaiah at them saying that their worship of God is worthless and their teachings are but rules taught by men. Still in the presence of the Pharisees Jesus turns to the crowd, calls everyone to him, and begins teaching that it is not what goes into a person that makes them unclean but what comes out of a person. In this way Jesus returns to the issue of handwashing, not as a direct answer to the Pharisees but sideways through his teaching of the people. This teaching directly overturns much of the ritual purity laws that the Pharisees were concerned with, so much so that even the disciples themselves have to ask for clarification. Jesus tells them that what comes out of the mouth in speech has its origin in the heart revealing what is there. It is what is there inside, the disposition and intentions of the heart that make a person clean or unclean.

This passage

Then Jesus leaves which at that point might have been a really good idea. He essentially dropped the mic and got outta there.

But for Jesus and for Matthew, what comes next is still about this interchange with the Pharisees, it is still about the teaching of what makes a person clean or unclean. It becomes a sort of illustration or perhaps more accurately a test case because everything about this little story underscores, underlines and highlights the kind of concern with racial lines and ritual purity that was just talked about.

Jesus deliberately travels to a Gentile area north of Galilee and meets a Gentile woman in need. Not only is she a Gentile she is also of Canaanite descent, the ancient unclean enemies of Israel. Then in speech both the woman and Jesus demonstrate the lines drawn around them. She cries out after him, calling him the Son of David, the designation of the Jewish messiah, which is a remarkable expression of belief coming from a Gentile. It is also an expression that carries with it an explicit reminder that it is for the Jews that he has come. Jesus, as though he is following the model of the Pharisees, ignores her at first, remarking to his disciples when they complain of her that he is sent only to the 'lost sheep of Israel.' But as he pauses long enough to say this, she comes right up to him, falls to her knees and asks him directly to help her. And Jesus goes one step farther to make clear what this story is about. He calls her a dog. In this sense Jesus is using the common language of the Pharisees.

But he also begins to twist this language just a little bit so that it begins to mean something different. He uses the word within a metaphor that brings the dog into the house. He also doesn't use the normal word for a grown street dog but instead a different form of the word that meant a small dog, perhaps a puppy or a household pet. As I said in the intro, Dogs in the 1st century were not commonly household pets and likely never in the way they are today, but it was done. And it seems to be what Jesus is meaning here. He says "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." He means that it is not right to take the blessing meant first for Israel and give it instead to the Gentiles. Jesus

again is speaking the concerns of the Pharisees that Israel would be blessed first, and perhaps the Gentiles would be fed later.

Then the climax of the story. There is a persistence to the woman's need and her faith, but there is also a keen wit and a willingness to press back against this Jewish messiah. She responds quickly, accepting the metaphor he is using, but turning it to her advantage. "Yes, she says, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." She requests for her and her daughter the blessing to the nations that should be the point of Jewish distinctiveness. Sometimes, the dogs eat at the same time from the scraps falling from the table. She points out that all the way along the biblical story Gentiles have been folded into God's great blessing.

It is in the woman's faithful answer that the racial divide that has been underscored by this story is crossed. And by pressing her in this way Jesus asks her to voice the truth of his teaching in the preceding verses. This Gentile woman, unclean in every normal way demonstrates by her faith that what is inside of her is clean. And Jesus finally responds in his usual manner of gentle healing saying, "O, woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted."

The healing that Jesus extends at the end of the story and the commendation of her faith pronounces an overcoming of the Pharisees concern for racial and ritual purity. It also is one of the many developments all the way along the book of Matthew that the structure of the blessing of God is changing, that Jesus is drawing around him a new people of God. This builds until Matthew includes the great commission at the end of the book. "Go into all the world and preach this good news"

A more personal word:

There is another dimension that I wish to switch into for a moment, another way of entering into this story. I invite you to imagine again for a moment the experience of this woman. She is courageous and persistent with Jesus demonstrating immediately a faith in who he is and his power to heal. She is also aware no doubt of the divide between her and Jesus, thus the need for courage. For a few minutes this divide seems like it carries the last word. When Jesus begins to speak he uses the language of the game and begins to change it, drawing these divisions around them both until he meets her finally with compassion and gentleness. When Jesus meets us, he meets us where we are, and where we perceive ourselves to be. He even meets us where others have tried to put us wherever that place is. He doesn't shirk from naming what we secretly fear or where we fear we are in the scheme of things. Jesus is to be found there with us. Then he transforms and transcends those divisions and draws us near. No matter the lines of division that come up in our lives, the end of the story is that they all fall away.

Conclusion:

The Canaanite woman is an example to us of what sort of person Jesus is drawing around him as the new people of God, people from all kinds of places, to form a people that will be a blessing to the world. This woman is a person who is full of compassion for her daughter who approaches Jesus on behalf of that daughter. She is a person with a great faith in Jesus, willing to seek him out, to meet him face to face and to state her case.

#3. Where are we called to be like the Gentile woman being called to be individuals of courage, great faith and perseverance in an effort to challenge lines of division and difference.

And in this story we meet again the Jesus we know and the Jesus that is at work today among us, drawing out divisions, holding people together across the those divisions and working to transcend and abolish them. There is so much that we still wrestle with today. Different ways that we draw the circle

that exclude others, different ways that we are excluded. There are distinctions that matter, ways of life that brings blessing to others, and ways of life that don't. A willingness to come to Jesus in faith asking mercy from him will continue to assist us in being wise in this regard.

#1. How or where does our worship as individuals and as a community get separated from a different and just way of living?

#2. Where might we be like the Pharisees holding tightly to lines of division and difference?