

Women of the Bible: the Faith of a Foreigner

Leviticus 19:33-34 Matthew 15:21-28

Final message in the series on the women of the Bible... This will prepare us for Palm Sunday and Holy week, because we'll look at an event next week that has similar themes to today's account.

As I read this, I want you to pay close attention to Jesus' words and actions here, and how he responds to a woman who makes a request of him...

Matthew 15:21-28

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon ("The district of Tyre and Sidon" is code for "pagan country." Jesus is in historically unsavory Gentile territory, outside the fold of Israel) ²²Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.'²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.'²⁴ He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.'²⁶ He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'²⁷ She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

This is the word of the Lord.

I'm curious, what did you hear? How did this settle with you? These past two weeks I read more studies and commentaries about this passage than I've

read about any passage in a long time. One of the commentaries began with these words: “This passage presents challenges for preaching.” No kidding. Because... this doesn’t sound like Jesus at all—the Jesus we know from the vast majority of the gospel accounts.

First, he ignores this woman and her plea for help. Jesus never ignored people, especially those who cried out for help. *Second*, he says that his mission is exclusive to Israel. Which we know from reading the gospels isn’t the case. *Then*, he insults her by referring to her as a dog, as some Israelites commonly did when referring to certain non-Jewish ethnic groups. They called them dogs. Even though there were two different words back then to describe a dog: an indoor dog that’s a family pet; and an outdoor (feral) dog that’s a mangy mutt that wanders the streets and eats scraps of garbage. Jesus uses the first word here, a diminutive expression for a small-ish house dog—and not the other word that was commonly used in reference to outsiders like her. That’s an important detail to take into account, but even so, it’s still insulting. Why would Jesus do that?

None of this is Jesus-like. What is going on here?

Some recent commentators see this as a moment where Jesus is “caught with his compassion down” and is forced to confront his own prejudice. And in a reversal of roles, the respected teacher learns, from an outsider, the need to

broaden his ministry to those outside the house of Israel. But that can't be the case, because from the very start of his ministry, Jesus taught and acted in a way that made it abundantly clear that his ministry would be to both outsiders and insiders. In fact, his very first act of ministry and teaching got him thrown out of the synagogue precisely because he told them that his mission *included* the Gentiles, whom God had always loved. *And*, he reminded them, from their sacred scriptures, that *their* mission was also to be a light to the nations. And the faithful Jewish nationalists didn't want to hear any of that. (So they tried to hurl him off a cliff. Seriously, you can read about it in Luke 4)

Maybe Jesus felt that *because he was on a mission* he needed to hurry to get to Jerusalem where his work would be fulfilled during Holy Week, and he didn't have time for this foreigner. But *that* can't be the case (being in a hurry; he *is* on a mission and headed toward Jerusalem), but it can't be the case that he's got his mind set on getting to Jerusalem in a hurry, because by going through Tyre and Sidon he is going *way* out of his way to get there. In fact, it's practically in the opposite direction. That's like someone deciding to go from Edmonds to Olympia by taking the ferry to Kingston and then driving all the way around the Olympic peninsula, instead of taking I-5.

Something else has got to be going on here.

I wonder if this is a case of not being able to catch the nuance of the interaction because we can't see the facial expressions and body language, and we can't hear the tone of voice that goes with the facial expressions.

Perhaps we tend to read our *own* tone of voice and feelings into the words? Maybe we tend to hear Jesus speaking like we hear t.v. preachers, or very serious preachers we may have listened to growing up.

Any of those things could cause us read this encounter in a certain way—all of which make Jesus sound like a jerk. Or, it makes him sound like one of the nationalist Israelites who carries prejudices toward other ethnic groups.

There is definitely something going on that we can't see and hear in this encounter. Because if this was Jesus being dismissive and exclusive, then how come this woman kept coming closer to him?... Did she see something and know something about him, and hear and see something in his response to her that kept her engaged?... In spite of the fact that, on the surface, he was rude to her?

Btw, it's actually the disciples who are *most* rude to her, and dismissive. "Tell her to go away, she's yelling at us" is their response to her—which is a tone-deaf response because she wasn't just yelling at them; she was crying out for mercy, she was desperate, and pleading for help. They want Jesus to tell her to go away, and please notice, Jesus doesn't do *that*. That's our first clue that

something else is going on here. Jesus doesn't tell her to go away, as the disciples abruptly told him to do.

I wondered then, if there was something about Jesus that kept this woman engaged despite the harsh words?... Did his warmth and compassion shine through in order for her to be bold in her response and not to give up and go away?... We don't really know, and can only wonder (with an informed kind of wonder).

We *do* know that whatever the tone was, the woman was commended for her persistence and her faith. She did not respond with anger or defensiveness, but with humility and reverence. In fact, even as a Canaanite, she uses Jewish religious language, and worship language, as she addresses Jesus with the words "Lord" and "Son of David." Those are Jewish messianic terms. And, she kneels before him, as an act of humility, as she seeks mercy. The *disciples* never did that, nor did they address Jesus in the same manner, respectfully and reverently. They are kind of presumptuous, actually.

Again, there is something going on here that we can't see and hear, that felt like an invitation to her to continue to come close and ask for help. And we have a couple of ideas of what that might be.

One, we can look at this as *teasing banter*. A playful interaction. British scholar NT Wright sees it this way. Jesus' reputation precedes him in foreign territory, this woman clearly knows about him and his reputation, and so there is some kind of recognition between them, and Jesus has a moment, perhaps for the disciples' benefit, where he playfully interacts with this woman, which then invites her to respond in kind, knowing that she will persist, and that she will show these religious insider disciples what true faith looks like.

And the fact that he uses the household pet word for “dog” instead of the mangy mutt word—which was the word that was *commonly* used among Israelites to describe Canaanites and other despised foreigners, which she no doubt would have heard used before, in a derogatory manner—perhaps this clued her in that Jesus was messing with her, and that she could give him the business in return.

Here is how I picture this—with an illustration that doesn't correlate exactly to this account, but perhaps puts it in terms that we can visualize more easily. Let's say there is a nice restaurant in a less than nice neighborhood, but it's a restaurant that has been around for a while, and it serves great food, and regular customers continue go there in spite of the location. And the manager of that restaurant has gained a reputation in that neighborhood for being generous and

kind to *everyone*. He helps low income and homeless people with food or whatever assistance they need, no matter who they are or where they came from. He helps students by hiring them when they need a job waiting tables. He is willing to go the extra mile to help people thrive. And the kind and generous manager of that restaurant has developed, not just a reputation, but a relationship with the people in that neighborhood, including the needy people.

Well, one day during a busy dinner shift, a woman comes to the restaurant asking for the manager, because she lost her job and she and her children need food; she's a bit desperate and she knows that he has helped others in her situation. And, she's making the request over the din of the noise of the restaurant, so it sounds loud. The staff tell this person to go away because she doesn't seem to fit in there, she's not there to sit down and eat, and, she is talking too loudly. The manager has been listening and watching without responding, perhaps to see how the *staff* respond to this person, perhaps in hopes that *they* will help her (in a teachable moment, because they've seen him help others like her before). But in hearing them tell her to go away, and having her persist in her asking, the manager turns and, with a bit of a smile as they make eye contact, says to her, "You know we don't serve your kind around here, right?"... "This place is only for paying customers".... She picks up on his banter and responds,

“Ya, but even your paying customers don’t eat all of their food; I know you have leftovers here.” The manager smiles, affirms her persistence, and gives her what she needs. Not leftovers, but good meals.

That’s one way we can interpret this encounter between the Canaanite woman and Jesus. It’s a playful encounter, with perhaps a teachable moment for the disciples. This is why I think that Jesus’ silence to her first cry for help wasn’t actually him *ignoring* her, but providing some space to see if the disciples would rise to the occasion. I think this because, in the story of the feeding of the 5,000, the disciples come to Jesus telling him that there’s a bunch of hungry people here who need food and—what do they do?—they tell Jesus to send them home—to go away. And Jesus, in *that* instance, fills the gap by telling them, “*You* give them something to eat.” And their response is, “How do you expect us to do that? We don’t have enough to go around...”

It’s a similar situation, a teachable moment, when Jesus expects *them* to have faith and do something, and when they don’t, *he* does something astounding, not just to feed people (that’s super important, as part of his mission), but to show the disciples what it looks like to have an abundance mindset instead of a scarcity mindset.

So, the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman could have been playful banter, with an opportunity for learning for Jesus' followers.

There is another way we can look at this, which is quite similar to this first interpretation, except it's less on the playful side and more on the teachable side.

Jesus has, before this incident, met several foreigners with grace and kindness, and has invited the disciples to do the same. And now, while they are deep in foreign land, he takes this opportunity to break down barriers. Because we tend to be more open and self-aware when we are in another country and culture, right? When *we're* the outsider, even though we may think we're the insider still. We're aware of how we think and feel about people in that culture & country, and we're more aware of ourselves and how we're speaking and acting when we're away from home. And so, Jesus takes this opportunity to break down a dividing wall, and provide some cross-cultural learning for his followers. But in an odd and somewhat subversive sort of way.

Pause briefly for a moment for poetry... There is a wonderful Emily Dickinson poem that I always think of when reading Jesus' parables in particular, and also when observing some of his ministry. And this week I thought of her poem when reading this encounter. Here is what Emily Dickinson says:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —

*Success in circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm delight
The Truth's superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every [one] be blind —*

What she's saying is, sometimes if you hit people right between the eyes with your teaching, especially if it's a hard teaching, they won't get it; it won't sink in. It's too "bright," to use her word—too hard, too much, too much data and information if you will, and people may react defensively. In order for the truth to sink in, she says, tell it slant. In other words, in indirect, or odd ways. Which is exactly what Jesus did in his parables.

In a way, this is what Jesus is doing here. Call it slant, call it playful, call it odd or subversive, what he is doing here is teaching his disciples about breaking down barriers by saying out loud what the Jewish people believed *in the silence of their minds and hearts*. In other words, Jesus is outing their prejudice. By saying words that *they are thinking*, but would never say out loud themselves. Not in a foreign country, especially.

Using the restaurant analogy, when the manager tells the woman who shows up asking for help that "We don't serve your kind around here; this restaurant is for paying customers only," we can imagine that his staff were

startled by that and reacted with, “Did he just say what we think he said?? We know he isn’t like that. He’s never said anything like that before.” And in that moment, if they have ears to hear and hearts that are open, they might take a moment to confront *their own thinking and prejudice* that caused *them* to reflexively react by telling her to go away.

Here is another quote from Kenneth Bailey a professor and theologian who lived and taught in the Middle East for 60 years—in Beirut, Lebanon, which, interestingly, is only 20 miles from Tyre and Sidon. Bailey’s work has been to understand and better communicate the stories of the Gospel in light of Middle Eastern culture. His immersion in middle eastern culture and practices leads him to believe that Jesus used this occasion to demonstrate to his disciples what exclusivity looks like and *to let them feel the discomfort*. Jesus takes what was the common Jewish attitude toward outsiders and actually puts them into words which sound harsh and shocking when spoken to a foreign woman pleading for the sanity of her daughter. Bailey says the following: **“It is acutely embarrassing to hear and see one’s deepest prejudices verbalized and demonstrated. As that happens, one is obliged to face those biases, often for the first time.”**

It’s an unusual way to teach a lesson. But it gets the point across, doesn’t it? And somehow, through this lesson for his disciples, Jesus was able to

communicate to this woman that her faith—the faith of a foreigner—would be met with grace and welcome.

I can see in this story how Jesus used this encounter to bring home the message that in him there are to be no dividing walls. The old barriers and prejudices are to be broken down because salvation had come *to everyone*.

This interpretation makes sense to me, especially in light of the fact that even *after Jesus' resurrection* there are two instances where some of Jesus' disciples still think he was sent only to Israel, for Israel. They ask him if he's going to restore the nation of Israel to its former greatness—forget everyone else. It isn't until a few chapters into the book of Acts that Peter, in particular, finally gets it. Again, it's through a unique and startling teaching medium (it was told to him slant, big time) and it finally got through to him that Gentiles are included, and are not “unclean” (that's the word Peter uses). The disciples finally, then, understand that Gentiles aren't dogs. They are human beings.

Even though their Jewish law, their treasured law, states very clearly, in of all places Leviticus, that foreigners are to be treated as citizens. Did you hear that in the text that Lynn read for us? Although in our account this morning they are on *foreign* turf, the law states very clearly that if or when foreigners are on *Israel's* turf they are to be treated as neighbors, and that the people are to love

the foreigners as themselves. As is stated in Jesus' summary of all of the commandments, when asked which is the greatest; he says they boil down to two: Love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength; and... love your neighbor as yourself, which clearly included foreigners. They, too, are one's neighbors.

Perhaps what Jesus shows us in this morning's account is that it doesn't matter whose turf we're on—foreign soil, home soil, it's all God's land anyway. *And*, all people are worthy of having their needs met. All people are worthy of experiencing God's grace.

Including a woman and her daughter, Canaanites, outsiders and foreigners. Jesus affirms her faith. Yet when we get right down to it, he sees her, not primarily as a foreigner, but as a human being, a woman, a mother, a person in need of help.

Next week we will see Jesus again amongst *a lot* of foreigners, as he makes his way into Jerusalem, and once he enters the city heads straight to the temple and rearranges the furniture a bit.

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