Matthew 15:21-28

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22Immediately 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.’23But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.’24He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’25But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’26He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’27She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’28Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.

A World Full of Dogs

1. Difficulty of passage.

We usually look at Jesus as a fountain of compassion and grace, one who we are eager to approach. Yet in today’s story, he is not presented as a fountain of grace and compassion as he begins by ignoring this desperate mother, then he implies that she’s not part of the right crowd for him to heal, and finally calls her a dog. If I were this poor woman, crying for mercy for my poor child, and I was greeted by such indifference, indeed by such insult, might I not leave angrily? Might I not confess that I was wrong about Jesus? I would likely be thinking, “He’s not the man I thought he was. He has this cold side to him. This prejudice. Let me go find another messiah.”

But our faith requires us to ponder this passage, to hopefully find a way to explain Jesus’ actions. And just like this Canaanite woman, our faith is rewarded by our persistence. Jesus teaches us not only that we should persevere in our pleas with sustained belief in God’s mercy; this is also a lesson about God’s love extending to all people in all places at all times.

1. Where are you going, Jesus?

We begin with a little background on today’s passage. Jesus has just returned from the “lonely place” where he had fed the crowds and now comes to Galilee, a Jewish region, and he scolds the Pharisees (verses 1-20) about their traditions which defined people as clean and unclean based on what they ate. According to Jesus, it’s not what goes into the mouth that makes a person unclean, but what comes out of our mouths – evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, and slander. Now, as if to drive the point in, Jesus takes his disciples to the regions of Tyre and Sidon, in modern day Lebanon, a non-Jewish region, filled with Canaanites, a cursed people by Jewish estimations.

Jesus himself refers to the cities of Tyre and Sidon in less-than complimentary terms when he says of Chorazin and Bethsaida (two cities in Judea), “it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you.” (Matthew 11:21-22) – not exactly a flattering statement about Tyre and Sidon. So why is Jesus traveling here?

Luke reports that Jesus took his ministry into Samaria, a region that Jews actively avoided because they despised the people living there. Luke further records that he was not welcomed in the Samaritan villages he visited (Luke 9:51-53). It seems to me that Jesus is up to his old tricks again, preparing to challenge his disciples to stretch what they believe to be the boundaries of God’s grace.

1. A painful silence

Matthew records that “immediately” a Canaanite woman comes upon Jesus and the disciples and starts shouting, pleading, for her daughter to be healed. We don’t know exactly what ails the daughter, but we do know that she’s dreadfully ill. And Jesus does not respond to the woman’s pleas. Why not? He led his disciples into this region. He had certainly proven that he *could* heal this woman’s daughter. Why doesn’t he say something?

Jesus’ silence was fully for the benefit of his disciples. Imagine how they would have felt, walking through ‘enemy’ territory, and hearing this woman pleading, even calling Jesus “Son of David,” and “Lord.” She seemed to have the same belief that the disciples had. And though she was Canaanite, to the disciples her desperate cries probably sounded no different than the cries of a Jewish mother, or of any mother whose daughter is suffering. The disciples were experiencing a bit of emotional tension as their prejudice confronted their pity. This woman by definition was not a beneficiary of God’s mercy. She was outside of God’s territory. Why couldn’t Jesus just stay within the boundaries of Israel?

The disciples’ response betrays their frustration: “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” *Us?* She was only shouting after Jesus. Could it be that the disciples felt that they too were being asked to do something? Could it be that Jesus had set them up?

1. Cultural Bias

Jesus responds to the disciples’ request by apparently agreeing with them: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Yet why is he here in this region if not to minister to the lost sheep *outside* the house of Israel? Could it be that he’s reminding the disciples of their own exclusive attitudes toward their neighbors? Perhaps they *want* Jesus to help this poor woman. Jesus is reminding them that according to their own tradition, this is discouraged.

The woman persists, and Jesus goes a step further: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Ouch! Did Jesus just call her a dog? Yet is that not the way so many of God’s chosen looked upon the Canaanites, as a cursed, vile people? Do we not do the same from time to time, asking God’s blessing upon ourselves and overlooking the suffering of those who seem so distant in space or culture or politics. Can we convince ourselves that we deserve or have earned our blessings because of our religion? Perhaps not, but we can ignore their plight. No one knows how many Germans found the Nazi policies toward the Jews repulsive and unjust, yet most were dumbfounded when they saw the horrors of concentration camps as allied soldiers forced them to witness the carnage. The suicide rate in Germany skyrocketed in 1945, in part due to the shame felt among citizens who saw that their failure to take a stand against hatred had cost over six million innocent lives. What prevents a person from speaking out against systematic discrimination? What prevented the disciples from taking a stance and asking Jesus to help this poor Canaanite woman?

1. People of great faith

The Canaanite woman winds up being the only one to plea her case: “Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Her faith in Jesus is undeterred, and if she is the only one to voice her cause, so be it. And even if Jesus *is* sent primarily for the lost sheep of Israel, there may be a crumb of mercy left over for a poor woman who loves her daughter.

In the end, Jesus grants the woman her request, as he had always intended to. He came to the region of Tyre and Sidon for no other reason than to show help this woman, and in so doing show his somewhat narrow-minded disciples two things: First, that God’s grace is not limited geographically, racially, culturally, politically, or in any other capacity. Second, people of true faith are just as likely to appear outside of Israel as they are to appear *within* Israel. In the recent past, Jesus had described his most stalwart disciple as one of “little faith.” This Canaanite woman is one of “great faith.” Jesus described a Roman centurion similarly, declaring, “I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.” (Matthew 8:10).

And so Jesus’ excursion into the region of Tyre and Sidon was essential in order to 1) force the disciples to recognize the shame of their own elitism, 2) provide them an example of great faith, the kind that he had not yet seen by his own inner circle, and 3) show them that God’s grace and mercy are not restricted to any particular community. Hardly a wasted trip for them or for us. Let us pray that we would, as disciples, extend God’s love and mercy to all peoples at all times, that we would advocate for those who are ignored or despised by others, and that we would have a persistent faith, trusting that God has both the ability and the will to deliver us from every plight.