

Matthew 15:10-28

¹⁰Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: ¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” ¹²Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” ¹³He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” ¹⁵But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” ¹⁶Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

²¹Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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.” 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.

Don’t Let Your Ego Get in the Way

Many a good Christian cringes a little at today’s passage. We have been taught from youth, trained in our Confirmation classes, that Jesus is divine, God manifest in the flesh. We have been taught to believe that believing otherwise is heresy. We place so much emphasis on *Jesus the Divine* that we overlook *Jesus the human being*. And so when we read today’s passage, we automatically start thinking of excuses for Jesus’ rather rude behavior – Jesus is *testing* the woman, or Jesus is *instructing* his disciples, or *dogs get sick eating table scraps*. If you heard your own child say something like Jesus said, you would reprimand that child. So what are we to do with Jesus, who turns down the appeal of a desperate woman whose daughter is in agony and then insinuates that she is a sub-species, a dog? I don’t like any of the excuses I’ve heard, and I would put forward the notion that Jesus meant exactly what he said.

As I mentioned before, Jesus was a human being as well as being the Son of God as well as being a Jew; the Jewish part of Jesus informed him that his mission lay with the lost sheep of Israel. The human part of Jesus knew what it was like to have a bad day...or a bad month or a bad year. Why would Jesus be so insensitive and rude? If we review the book of Matthew just a bit we see that Jesus the Jew has not been having such an easy time “feeding” the “lost sheep of Israel.” Most people who came to Jesus came to be healed of physical ailments, and many could care less about his sermons, but what he *did* say raised quite a ruckus. Jesus said, ‘Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house.’ An enraged home-church congregation nearly drives him off a cliff! Religious

delegations were coming to him from Jerusalem with some serious accusations, asking for explanations as to *why* he and his disciples were breaking ancient traditions of ritual purity that were considered sacred. He was running into resistance from all sides. Perhaps the straw that broke the camel's back was the arrest and execution of his cousin John the Baptist at the hands of King Herod, who was himself a Jew and supposed leader of the Jewish people. I believe that all these circumstances weighed heavily on Jesus as he was doing his best to bring his own people to this new way of perceiving God and the Law of Moses. I think Jesus must have been quite frustrated with "the lost sheep of Israel" when he and his disciples decided to head north to Tyre and Sidon, the Cancun of the region located in modern-day Lebanon. I think they needed a break from their ministry. I think Jesus needed a vacation.

So Jesus and his disciples go on a spiritual retreat to Tyre and Sidon hoping to get away from it all, only to encounter a foreign woman shouting to him for mercy. We all know what it's like to be on vacation and you get a call from a customer. I worked as an alarm salesman for five years, and though I didn't do any sales work while on vacation I too often had to deal with installers and customers while I was off. I recall relaxing poolside at a resort in Florida and having to resolve issues with an angry customer over some mistake an installer had made and asking myself why I ever decided to become a salesman. I was probably less than helpful to this customer, saying that I would handle the problem when I got back to New York. I imagine Jesus, with his disciples, sitting oceanside, hearing the lulling rhythm of waves, looking out into the sea as his mind is being cleansed from all the clamor of past years, only to hear a foreign woman shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." Vacation over. He had turned off his cell phone. He had changed the message on his office answering machine to indicate that he would be out for a few weeks. He had even chosen to vacation somewhere where the crowds were not going to be following him. And now he hears this foreign woman in the background shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." I wonder if he might have reached for the Tylenol.

Jesus does not answer her at first, perhaps hoping that she would go away. And then he says some things that perhaps he hopes will drive her away. "My ministry lies with my own people, woman. I can't waste my time and talent on you."

The woman persists. "Lord, help me."

Still irritated, Jesus says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Maybe this will drive her away.

The reason that I had Ken and Karen read today's Gospel in two sections was to draw out what may seem to be the hypocrisy in Jesus as he says, "What comes out of the mouth...is what defiles." And to imagine a very weary Jesus hearing himself say to a desperate mother, "I don't have time for dogs."

At this point I think Jesus would be pleased if we shifted our attention away from him. I don't think Jesus would be very proud of what he said to this poor woman. But Jesus himself points out to us that what this woman said next astounded him.

"Lord, even the dogs eat crumbs that fall from the Master's table."

And suddenly a rude and dismissive Jesus becomes the Jesus we all know and love, the one who commends the woman's faith and heals her daughter. It's possible that this incident led Jesus to expand his ministry beyond the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" to include such "dogs" as the Canaanites, the

Samaritans, and you and me, and I believe that scripture bears evidence of a transition in Jesus' ministry, and the one who deserves credit for the shift is this Canaanite woman, this mother whose daughter suffers so, the one whose faith so astounded Jesus and caused him to change his mind – it is after this encounter that Jesus takes his message to people who will “praise the God of Israel,” implying that they themselves are considered to be outside of Israel. It is at the end of the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus gives his disciples the great commission, to go and make disciples of *all* nations. So perhaps there's more to this story than meets the eye. Perhaps more is happening than the healing of a very sick girl. Perhaps we're seeing Jesus, prompted by the faith of a foreign woman, take his ministry in a new direction that will have vital implications for you and for me.

So let's shift our focus from this rather weary and cranky Jesus to the true hero of this story, the Canaanite woman. Think, for a moment, of your desperate hour, of the time that all hope seemed lost for you. Perhaps your situation was like this woman's, having a child that you loved dearly, and seeing that child tormented day and night by a power that no one could comprehend or control, what people would have called demons two thousand years ago. Perhaps *your* health was at stake, or your marriage was on the rocks. Perhaps your job was in the balance. Have you been there? And in your desperation you go to Jesus, only to hear him say, “I have better things to do. Your concerns are not my priority.” How would you respond? Be honest. Wouldn't you be a bit indignant? “Who does this Jesus think he is, that his people are more important than me or my people? How dare he be so dismissive; I'll be damned if I come to *him* again!” Have you been so angry with God for not attending to your needs even when you fall on your knees and plead with him? I wonder if you could have tempered your response. And if any of you men had a daughter who was suffering and went to Jesus for help only to hear him say, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” not the lost sheep of Italy, or Norway, or Ireland, or fill-in-your-nationality-here, would you have been able to temper *YOUR* response? I think I would have been a bit indignant and said, either out loud or to ourselves, “*who do think you are talking to me like that? Do you think you can walk on water or something?*” I might even call the ACLU and report this doctor's derogatory comments, file a lawsuit.

And what would the end result be? Perhaps I'd win. Perhaps Jesus would pay for his comments. My pride would be intact; I'd feel that I got some justice. And my daughter would still be gravely ill.

It is so hard for us to swallow our pride, isn't it? Even when our loved one, our own children, are suffering, we have a difficult time humbling ourselves and holding our tongues in order to get help. We hold God accountable to us, testing *him*, making demands of *him*, expecting *him* to always be ready to serve us. And when we don't get the answer we want when we want it, we so often walk away, sometimes indignant, sometimes enraged. “*How dare God treat me like that!*” As if life itself was an entitlement.

I've heard many a testimony of folks who stopped believing because they felt that God was uncaring, who thought that God put them last on his “to do” list, people who suffered and cried to God and did not receive the answer they had hoped for. It's easy for us to understand a person's lack of faith. We are all vulnerable to such unbelief. But I believe that such unbelief is temporary. We stop believing in God because we find something else to believe in, be it science or friends, or family, or money, or ourselves. As long as we have something else to believe in, we can keep God at arm's length; we can even examine and critique God as long as we have everything else that we need. But when we start to lose all those other things – our health, our job, financial security, our family, our friends, we find ourselves coming back to God. And when all else fails, we have nothing left but God. Eventually our only option is God.

For this Canaanite woman, Jesus was her only option. The suffering of her beloved daughter had brought her so low that her pride was no longer an issue. Dismissive comments and insults could not stop her from pursuing what she knew to be her only option; God's mercy.

Have you ever been brought so low as to consider Jesus your only hope? Have you been brought to the point where you had to swallow all your pride and endure not only God's silence but even rejection and humiliation because you know that have no other options? I believe that we are called to share in one another's struggles and help one another as best we can, but ultimately we all need to take our lesson from this Canaanite woman. We have to look to God as our final hope, and have a faith that sustains us in all circumstances, and trust that however long and hard our suffering may be, that our prayers will be answered, that our deliverance will come.