

"SHEEP AND DOGS AND JESUS"  
Matthew 15:21-28  
August 16, 2020  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
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Did you wince at all during the scripture reading? There are several reasons to wince. A desperate woman calls out to Jesus seeking help for her daughter and the disciples complain. *"Jesus send her away. She keeps shouting at us."* Wince # 1.

Jesus responds, *" Yea. Sorry. I was sent only to the Jews."* Wince # 2

And probably the biggest wince of all, #3. Jesus calls her a dog. Yes. He does. Our Jesus- the Son of God, the king of compassion and kindness and healing and all of that, looks at a woman in need and tells her that she is unworthy of the gifts meant for the Jews. There is a lot to unpack in these eight verses. Let's start at the beginning.

A couple of days before this, Jesus fed the crowd of thousands with a few loaves of bread and a couple fish, then he walks on water during a storm, Peter takes a few steps on the sea and falls in so Jesus rescues him. Then Jesus heals people and gets into a debate with the religious leaders about tradition. The complaint of the Pharisees and the scribes? That the disciples weren't washing their hands properly- ok, maybe we have a bit more sympathy for the religious leaders now than we would have had a year ago. But Jesus still disagreed with them.

He spoke to the crowd and explained that eating with unwashed hands isn't the problem for good Jews. The problem is when they speak words of evil that come from the depths of their hearts. No wonder Jesus left that area and headed to a place where there wouldn't be any Pharisees- the land of Sidon and Tyre- what we know today as Lebanon. There weren't any Pharisees there but there was a woman, a Canaanite, who begged Jesus to heal her daughter who was possessed by a demon.

Generations of animosity between the Jews and the Canaanites dated back to the time of Noah when he condemned the descendants of his son, Ham, to a life of slavery. Those descendants were the Canaanites. They were also the people displaced when Joshua led the Hebrew people into the Promised Land- which happened to be their ancestral land. Needless to say, the Jews and the people of Canaan weren't friendly. And to add another interesting dimension, if you check out Matthew's long genealogy of Jesus in chapter one, you will find three women of Canaanite ancestry listed quite prominently- Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth.

It may not have been that unusual for Jesus to be in that area because there were pockets of Jewish inhabitants living there. He may have gone there seeking some peace and quiet and maybe that is why he and the disciples were so rude to the unnamed woman. When Jesus does respond he says, "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*"

Remember that this story is told from a Jewish point of view for the writer, Matthew's, congregation of Jewish Christians. Earlier, in chapter ten, when Jesus gives the disciples their instructions he said, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

But now Jesus was in her neck of the woods, her home territory and somehow, she knew who he was. She called him, "*Lord, Son of David,*" a clear title of his Jewish status, but that didn't stop her - a non-Jew, a despised Gentile- from asking for his help. She was a woman on a mission and she allowed nothing to stop her- not even a rude, reluctant Messiah. She approaches him and falls to her knees and pleads, "Lord, help me." And then Jesus says the most un-Jesus thing he says in scripture. "*It isn't fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*"

Jesus! What would your mother say?

Some biblical scholars try to take the sting out of his insult by saying he was teasing her or testing her faith. I don't buy it. She knew what he meant.

The Jews called the Gentiles dogs and they didn't mean it as a compliment. In those days, dogs were not coddled house pets like ours are today. They were scavengers that lived in feral packs. They were considered dirty and would not have been welcome in or near a Jewish home.

This witty, wise, and persistent woman came right back at Jesus and said, "*That's true, but even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table.*" Only one person in scripture ever had an argument with Jesus and wins- and that person is this unnamed woman. I just love her!

Apparently, Jesus did too because he said, "*Woman, great is your faith! I will do what you ask. Your daughter is healed.*" And she was.

The writer of this Gospel wants to be absolutely clear that God remains faithful to the covenant made with the people of Israel; that Jesus' ministry is first and foremost to them. We will find that only after his death and resurrection is the door thrown wide open to welcome the Gentiles. The inclusion of this story about the persistent woman gives a glimpse of God's all-inclusive intentions. She wrenches a blessing from Jesus that her

daughter desperately needs but that most of the world would think she doesn't deserve. She doesn't care if Jesus calls her a dog, as long as she gets the table scraps. And she does.

She stands beyond the acceptable boundaries and stakes her claim on the mercy and generosity of God. In this way she actually ministers to Jesus, by encouraging him to move beyond ethnic and religious borders. As an outsider, she grasps what the disciples cannot perceive- that the good news belongs to everyone. There are only two people in the Gospel of Matthew who Jesus praises for their faith- one is a Roman centurion (8:10) and the other is our Canaanite friend- and both are Gentiles.

Healing stories often contain obstacles that must be overcome- this is the only time where that obstacle is Jesus himself. Jesus ignores, rebuffs, and insults this determined mother and still she persists. She isn't intimidated by the group of indignant disciples around him or even by the great man himself. She knows what her daughter needs and she will not leave until she gets it. She is a triple outsider- female, Canaanite, and Gentile. But instead of three strikes and you're out- she gets a homerun.

She never once complains about Jesus' call to minister to the Jews- she has no desire to take anything away from them. But somehow, she knows that there is enough to go around- enough of God's mercy, enough healing, enough grace. She embraces her status as an outsider and willingly accepts whatever crumbs may fall in her direction because she knows that even the crumbs hold the power of Jesus.

In her culture (and probably in ours too) her behavior is unacceptable. She is expected to be quiet and to defer to the men who have more power, more value, and more status than her kind. Everything she does is socially offensive. She approaches a religious man, she shouts, she makes demands, she refuses to take no for an answer. She takes the initiative. She will not be deterred. Her daughter's life and sanity are on the line. She will do anything she can to save her child.

Again and again, she violates boundaries because she believes that she and her daughter are worthy of God's blessings. And that proves her great faith. That is when we see the Jesus we know and love, he heals her child, and is not ashamed of learning something from this tenacious outsider.

You could even say he grows in his self-understanding and accepts a new vision of his mission.

The faith of this woman is contrasted quite clearly with the unbelieving religious leaders from Jerusalem. The outsiders are the ones who recognize Jesus when they see him while the insiders reject him.

Have you realized yet that this woman of dogged determination is also our ancestor- because we too, are *Gentiles*. We are the outsiders who were welcomed into the family, a fact that the Church often forgets or just plain ignores.

It is ironic that Christians spend so much time building walls, narrowing membership criteria, and drawing boundaries when we are the ones who came late to the table.

In the time of Jesus we were the ones who were not welcome. We were the ones who were unclean, we were the dogs. This fierce and faithful woman shows us what true belief looks like. How dare we tell others that they are not acceptable!

We are living in a time of deep and dangerous division in our nation and in our world.

We need tenacious and faithful women and men who refuse to be silenced in the face of injustice, inequality, and suffering.

We need people who are bold and brave to carry the banner of God's great mercy into the world.

We need persistent and prophetic men and women who know that silence is not an option.

We must be humble enough to celebrate that our God is an inclusive God and even those we despise are our sisters and brothers, too.

The beauty of this story is that the outsider finds a place of welcome on the inside of the heart of God. She was stubborn. She was wise, and most of all, she was loved by God.

In closing I offer you this poem by Jan Richardson: "Stubborn Blessing."

*Don't tell me no.*

*I have seen you feed the thousands,*

*seen miracles spill from your hands*

*like water, like wine,*

*seen you with circles and circles of crowds pressed around you*

*and not one soul turned away.*

*Don't start with me.*

*I am saying*

*you can close the door*

*but I will keep knocking.*

*You can go silent*

*but I will keep shouting.*

*You can tighten the circle*

*but I will trace a bigger one*

*around you,*

*around the life of my child*

*who will tell you no one surpasses a mother for stubbornness.*

*I am saying*

*I know what you*

*can do with crumbs and I am claiming mine,*

*every morsel and scrap you have up your sleeve.*

*Unclench your hand,*

*your heart.*

*Let the scraps fall*

*like manna,*

*like mercy*

*for the life of my child,*

*for the life of the world.*

*Don't you tell me no.*

May it be so. Amen.