

Proper 15A 2020 Sermon

Matthew 15: 21-28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just 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." 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." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

I had been the Rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Plainview, Texas for several years before I learned that the Search Committee and Vestry who had called me to be their priest had had one criterion for all candidates. If a candidate did *not* meet that one criterion, their name was dropped from consideration. What was the criterion? If a candidate had never lived south of the Mason-Dixon Line, their name was thrown out. Because I had spent three years at Seminary in Austin, Texas, I made the cut.

In the 1st-Century Mediterranean world in which Jesus lived, there were what sociologists call "in-groups" and "out-groups."¹ All people of the Jewish faith were considered members of "the house of Israel," descendants of Abraham, God's chosen people. That was their "in-group." Anyone who was *not* a descendent of Abraham was considered a "Gentile." And Gentiles, along with tax collectors, were considered to be, *a priori*, sinners, and religiously "unclean." (Matt. 18:17) They were an "out-group."

And, in Jesus' day, people were not *only* divided by whether they were Jew or Gentile. There were also, within the Jewish faith itself, what sociologists call "factions:" There were factions defined by geography: Galileans (like Jesus and his disciples) in the north, and Judeans in the south. There were factions defined by religious roles or beliefs within the Jewish religion itself: Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, etc.

In today's remarkable Gospel story, we see that even *Jesus*, in his fully human nature, was so steeped and immersed in the "in-group, out-group" mentalities of his own culture and religion, that it could cloud even **his** spiritual vision, such that he turns a blind eye to a woman who comes to him pleading for her daughter to be healed.

Such is the *overwhelming* power of human prejudice and partisanship.

What cultural presumptions would a Jew in Jesus' day have, concerning this woman in our Gospel story? First, she is a Gentile, and as I mentioned, Gentiles, like tax collectors, were considered sinners. Second, she was a Canaanite, and the Canaanites were ancient enemies of the Jews; **they** were the people Joshua had to conquer in order to claim the Promised Land. Third, women in 1st-Century Jewish culture were not supposed to initiate a conversation with a man in public, as this woman does. Fourth, the woman *shouts* at Jesus in public – a behavior which even us 21st-Century Americans would find unacceptable. In addition to these cultural presumptions, Jesus himself, at this point in his ministry, thinks that God **only** wants him and his disciples (Matthew 10:5) to bring the nourishing food of the Gospel to his fellow *Jews*, “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” – Jesus' own in-group.

And so, initially, Jesus is *silent* in response to this woman's desperate cry, “*Kyrie, eleison!* Lord, have mercy!” – that ageless cry of all who come to God for help. Jesus refuses even to acknowledge her. But the woman is not giving up, so Jesus tells her that his mission is “**only** to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” – Jesus' in-group. But this mother's love for her afflicted daughter is undying. She comes and kneels before Jesus and pleads, “Lord, *help* me!” But the exclusivist cultural and religious mindset which has temporarily taken over Jesus' consciousness is very strong. Jesus says to her, “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” One Biblical scholar notes that “Referring to Canaanites as dogs was a familiar and favorite insult of the Israelites. Calling a woman a female dog had the same tone as if it were shouted today in a high-school hallway.”²

But not even this hurtful insult will deter her. In profound and breathtaking humility, she *accepts* the demeaning label of “dog,” and responds, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.”

And those humble, **powerful** words *finally* pierce through the cultural and religious fog which has been clouding Jesus' vision. For, you see, twice, in previous clashes with the Pharisees over questions of ritual purity and scrupulous obedience to the Jewish Law, Jesus has quoted the prophet Hosea (6:6), when he said, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Matt. 9:13; 12:7). In virtually *every other* encounter that Jesus has with people over the entire span of his ministry, **mercy** is at the heart of his motivations and actions. And this is simply what this woman is *pleading* for: “Lord, have mercy! Christ, have mercy! Lord, have mercy!”

And Jesus' mind is changed.

The woman has exposed the cultural and religious bias which is the very air that Jesus and his fellow Jews have been breathing their whole lives. This Gentile woman is like a mirror into which Jesus looks and finally sees his unconscious prejudice and assumed privilege as a member of the house of Israel, God's chosen people. And in that mirror, he sees that his mission from God is far more expansive than he had imagined: it goes far beyond his own in-group. Indeed, at

the very end of Matthew's Gospel, the risen Christ will commission his disciples to "Go and make disciples of *all nations*..." (28:19)

Today's Gospel story could *not* be more contemporary and relevant. For the tendency to form "in-groups" and "out-groups" and factions seems to be part of our very DNA. We only need to look at the current tensions between Americans vs. "foreigners," Democrat vs. Republican, white vs. black, Christian vs. Muslim, Catholic vs. Protestant, evangelical Protestant vs. Mainline Protestant, and on and on. We have even, *somehow*, developed a chasm in recent months between Americans who think that by wearing masks we protect each other and Americans who think that being required to wear a mask violates their constitutional right to freedom. (Consider the matter of Fremont County Public Health Director Emma Davis having "endured a lot of cyberbullying, defamation of character, slander and threats" simply because she was doing her job and following the law;³ or the article in Tuesday's *Shopper* by the owner of the Waffle Wagon restaurant here in town, whose 15-year-old daughter has been verbally attacked because she was following the law.)⁴ It has even seemed, in recent months, that some Americans are fighting the Civil War all over again, Union vs. Confederate.

My friends, we so cling to our self-identification with our in-group or faction, that it can become all-consuming, and can take over our consciousness, our emotions, our minds and thoughts and actions. Our in-group identity can become our *only* identity! The fact that Matthew and Mark include this story of the Canaanite woman in their Gospels, even though, on the surface, it reflects poorly on Jesus, is, I think, proof of how deeply in-group and out-group attitudes are imbedded in our human unconscious, and get acted out in our daily lives.

I *love* this story, because it tells me that Jesus knows what it is like to have human feelings of in-group superiority and prejudice, and how easy it is for **any** of us to fall into those culturally and religiously toxic attitudes and mindsets, which are so symptomatic of living within the kingdoms of *this* world, and **not** the kingdom of God. *And* I love this story because Jesus shows us that he can be proven wrong – and can, himself, be redeemed! – by the very person whom he thought was not worthy of his attention, let alone his mercy; that very person whom he called a female dog.

But what *was* the most **important** identifier for this woman? Her gender? Her ethnic or national identity? Her religion? Or was it her being a mother – a fiercely-loving mother of a daughter who was in torment? Are not **all** mothers the *same* on **that** level of their identity, *whatever* their religion, nationality, in-group, or faction?

I love this story, and I *need* this story, because in it, Jesus admits that he is wrong, and allows his mind, his attitude, his feelings toward this loud, gentile, foreign woman to be changed. When the woman says, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table," I can imagine Jesus' face changing

from a look of irritation to a look of surprise, and then recognition. He finally recognizes the voice of God coming through the fierce love of this woman for her tormented daughter, and he allows her to teach him, to re-center him in God's mercy, his True Self. And since the New Testament word for "healing" and "saving" is the same word, we could say that, in this confrontative process leading to the healing and saving of the woman's daughter, Jesus himself is healed and saved.

What about you and me? Are we able, like Jesus, to be shown, in the midst of our mindsets of in-groups, out-groups, and factions, that there exists a far deeper, less superficial identity than any identification with nation, religion, ideology, or party: a core identity where, like that Canaanite woman, there is a fierce and abiding love which, once we see it, can only be recognized as coming from God?

I wonder what would have happened if the *a priori* criterion for being a candidate for Rector of St. Mark's Church, Plainview, Texas, was *not* having lived south the Mason-Dixon line, but rather was that the candidate have the love of God and neighbor deeply imbedded in their heart, and be willing to admit, like Jesus, that they might be wrong, and then to change and grow more deeply into God?

Would I still have made the cut? Would you?

AMEN

1 Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, "Ingroup and Outgroup," *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, pp. 87-89

2 *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1* (Propers 3-16), Wordsearch Edition

3 <https://www.canoncitydailyrecord.com/2020/07/28/fremont-county-public-health-director-emma-davis-leaves-for-new-opportunity-closer-to-home/>

4 *Canon City Shopper*, Tuesday, August 11, 2020, p. 15