

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

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Date: August 20, 2023, Year A, 12 Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Matthew 15:21-28

Title: This Doesn't Sound Like Jesus

Focus: Jesus initially seems to respond to this Canaanite woman with callous indifference. Yet, Jesus is the one who was constantly reaching out to outsiders. What's going on in this interaction in which this double outsider, a woman and a foreigner, persistently seeks healing for her daughter. In the end, Jesus commends her for her faith and heals her daughter.

Gospel reading Matthew 15:21-28

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.

This is a Troubling Passage

What do you think about this passage from Matthew's gospel? I would call it like it is—I would say that this is a troubling passage. Or at least a baffling one. This doesn't sound like Jesus. What's going on in this passage?

Jesus and his disciples have been on their "home turf," in the region of Galilee. The preceding two stories with Jesus feeding the 5000 men and more women and children and then Peter and the others in the boat and Jesus walking on the water have both taken place along the Sea of Galilee (or in the boat on the sea!).

Specifically, they have been in Gennesaret, which is on the west side of the Sea of Galilee (Mt. 14:34). As this passage opens, they leave the region and go to Tyre and Sidon (Mt. 15:21). These were 2 different coastal cities on the Mediterranean Sea. The distance from Gennesaret to Tyre, the closer of the two, would have been about 35 miles.

The setting is important because it reflects not just distance, but a cultural barrier or difference, too. They are no longer among a Jewish audience, but a Gentile one.

What happens next? “Just then a Canaanite women from that region came out and started shouting, ‘Have mercy on me, Son of David.’” She is seeking healing for her daughter.

The disciples view her as an irritant. They tried to shoo her away, saying to Jesus, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us” (v. 23b).

This sounds just like when the disciples tried to get Jesus to dismiss the crowds to the neighboring towns in Matthew 14:15, which we talked about 2 weeks ago. That story was when Jesus went away in a boat by himself following the death of John the Baptist. But the crowds followed him, and when he came ashore, he had compassion for them and healed their sick.

One of the things that I pointed out 2 weeks ago when talking about that passage that I thought was so remarkable was that Jesus was bearing the heavy weight of grief from learning of the death of John, and yet he responded with compassion when he came ashore and the crowds were already there, seeking to be healed.

Later, when the disciples petitioned Jesus to send them (the crowds) away as afternoon turned to evening,

¹⁶Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat” (Mt. 14:16). When the disciples said, “We have nothing. . . but these 5 loaves and 2 fish,” Jesus took and bless what they had and they fed 5000 men plus more women and children.

That’s not what happens here. Instead of displaying compassion, despite his grief, here he seems callous and indifferent: “. . . **he did not answer her at all**” (v. 23a).

This Does Not Sound Like Jesus

This does not sound like Jesus. When he was weighed down by grief, he went away to pray and took some time for himself. He was able to respond with compassion. Following that, in the passage we read last week, he dismissed the crowds, sent the disciples off in a boat, and went by himself to a mountain to pray. Later, as he saw the disciples’ boat far from shore and battered by the wind, he came to them by walking on the water, rescued Peter, and calmed the wind and the waves.

Now they’ve trekked over to a different region where Tyre and Sidon are and when this woman asks for mercy, Jesus first ignores her (“he did not answer her at all” v. 23). Then he defines his mission as not including her: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v. 24).

When I say, “This does not sound like Jesus,” it’s because so often Jesus defies the existing social, cultural, or religious norms or boundaries, whereas here he seems more bound by them.

Jesus Defying the Norms

Here are some ways Jesus pushed the expectations or boundaries at other times:

- Jesus made a lot of religious people angry by pointedly eating with sinners and tax collectors or healing on the Sabbath.
 - Zacchaeus in Luke 19—Jesus ate at his house, an encounter that transformed his life.
 - Calling disciples who were tax collectors (Matthew) and ordinary folks like fishermen.
- Having close friendships with women like Mary and Martha and counting them among his most trusted followers
- Jesus spoke with a Samaritan woman at the well. Like this Canaanite woman, she was a “double outsider,” a Samaritan and a woman. But Jesus surprised her by asking for a drink of water and initiating a conversation with her. She was so transformed that she went to tell her whole community about Jesus. (John 4)
- Jesus taught about showing love for a neighbor in a parable that explicitly used a Samaritan to challenge these cultural barriers. (Luke 10)
- There was the time Jesus healed the servant of the Roman Centurion—When the Centurion basically told Jesus, “Just say the word and I know my servant will be healed,” Jesus said “I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.” (Told in Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10)

So, there were plenty of times when Jesus defied cultural norms or went outside the boundaries of his primary circle. . . And yet here, he at first ignores her, then defines his mission as not including her, and then seems to insult her.

We’ve Got to Dig Deeper to Follow the Clues

Because this picture of Jesus is so different from what we’ve seen over and over again, we’ve got to dig deeper to identify the clues that help us understand what’s going on in this passage. Here are a few things to point out and ponder:

Why did they go to Tyre and Sidon anyway? I think their travel there was intentional. The text doesn’t say that they were invited there. This wasn’t an encounter that spontaneously happened while they were on the way to somewhere else. They left from Gennesaret in Galilee and after this returned to Galilee (See v. 29). They had to go there and then come back to Galilee, so traveling there seems intentional, which suggests that Jesus’ actions in this encounter are intentional. He had a purpose or knew what he intended with this encounter. Some readers/Bible scholars propose that Jesus was intentionally testing this woman through the way he challenged her.

Interpersonal Debate in the First Century: Where we perceive Jesus' words as harsh or even insulting, they may not have been heard that way in that cultural context. ELCA Church leader and scholar Cory Driver, whom I mentioned 4 weeks ago with his insightful comments about terrace farming and how the water and wind get seeds to the best soil, is helpful in describing the conversation here, too.

He said, "What happens next is best understood as a witty game—not hurtful barbs—between two people particularly gifted with words. Jesus commended the woman's faith and gave her exactly what she had asked for."

Cory describes Jesus as intentional with what he wanted to show the disciples: "Jesus refused to allow his disciples to silence, ignore or shut out the cries of a woman foreign *to them*."¹

He says it's witty banter, not hurtful words. Another scholar offers even greater detail:

A colleague of mine who is a New Testament scholar explained to me that Jesus' words would not have been shocking or offensive to the people around him in the story, nor to the original readers of Matthew's gospel. Personal insults and harsh exchanges were part and parcel of First Century rhetoric, and Matthew would never have intended to portray Jesus as being a bigot. So we can't blame Jesus for this kind of speech. The point was to show Jesus healing a Gentile, which actually would have been more shocking for Matthew's Jewish readers.²

This last part about the shock being that Jesus was healing a Gentile is what Cory Driver was saying as well.

Matthew's Portrayal of the Story: Gospel writer Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience. What would have stuck out to them was not that Jesus seemed to speak harshly to this woman, which, as we have said, may not have been unusual according to the custom of the time. What would have stuck out to Matthew's immediate audience is that "Jesus healed an outsider! Remarkable!"

Secondly, Matthew's placement of the story in a thematic framework is an indication of what he thinks this story is about or how he views it thematically. The big story before this is a big crowd following Jesus, Jesus healing the sick among them, and then feeding 5000 (Matthew 14:13-21). The big story following this is Jesus healing people in the crowd and feeding 4000 men plus women and children (Matthew 15:29-39). As a narrator developing a theme, this placement by Matthew suggests that he

¹ Cory Driver. "Lectionary Blog: Unity in 'foreignness.'" Posted August 14, 2023 at *Living Lutheran*. <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2023/08/lectionary-blog-unity-in-foreignness/>

² Leah Shrader, "8 Ways to Preach about Charlottesville, White Supremacy, and Racial Justice," posted on the Patheos website August 15, 2017. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/ecopreacher/2017/08/8-ways-preach-charlottesville-white-supremacy-racial-justice/#zyVGYPY2ui9EWfkh.99>

sees this, too, as a healing story. Like the stories before and after it, this story is about healing, abundance, and grace.

She is Persistent, Determined: The woman's initial request to Jesus (a deep-seated plea, really: "Have mercy on me. . ." (v. 22b)) and her continued response to Jesus supports this as a healing story as well. Despite the geographic distance and the religious and cultural difference, she seems to know something about Jesus. Great crowds had been following him and he had been healing those who were sick. Might word of this reached her? That's reasonable to conclude.

Another observation is that she addresses him Lord and calls him "Son of David," recognizing his heritage, which is intriguing that a Gentile would highlight that. Three times she calls him "Lord" (vv. 22, 25, 27). And as she approaches Jesus, "She came and knelt before him" (v. 25). Kneeling is a posture of way of demonstrating respect or honor or deference. It's also a prayer or worship posture.

And the times that we may perceive unkind words or insult, she doesn't respond with irritation or anger. Whether it is because she perceives no slight at all or she ignores it in favor of her focus on her goal of healing for her daughter, she will not be dissuaded. She is there to have her daughter healed and she sees Jesus as the one to offer it.

Jesus Does not Send Her Away: That Jesus initially did not respond to her sticks out to us, but there is something else to notice: The disciples urged Jesus, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us. . ." (v. 23).

What initially sticks out is that he has not responded to her, but neither has he sent her away as the disciples urged (v. 23a).

One more thing: the word for *after* as in "She keeps shouting after us" can also be translated *behind* us ("She keeps shouting *behind* us"), meaning physical orientation or position. Translated or understood in this way, when Jesus did not do as the disciples asked by sending her away, he allowed her concerns to then come to the forefront. She moves in the scene to being "*behind* us" to being front and center. Jesus demonstrates that he refused to make the disciples (or us) comfortable by sending her away and silencing her. Instead, he allowed her to come out from behind the disciples to bring her concerns to the center.

What's the Good News Here?

What's the Good News here? I think there is Good News in this woman and in Jesus' ultimate response to her.

This double-outsider, a woman who is a Gentile, is "Good News" personified. Her determination, courage, and persistence, which Jesus recognizes as he commends her faith, are all inspiring. That's an example to follow. That's Good News.

And her persistence and Jesus commending her faith demonstrate more Good News. Jesus and the disciples left the region of Galilee and went to Tyre and Sidon. They encountered this woman who was an outsider to them—or at least to the disciples, who urged Jesus to send her away. The Good News at the end of this story is that even when we're prone to want to draw lines to indicate who is in and who is out, this story demonstrates that God's mission and mercy and grace are bigger and broader than what we're inclined to define.

Thanks be to God for this persistent, faithful woman. And thanks be to God for grace that is wider than we have imagined.