

More Like the Master  
Matthew 15:21-28  
August 17, 2008

When you think about “Jesus” what image comes to mind? Perhaps the benevolent and compassionate Jesus who fed 5000, or the powerful, assured Jesus who walked on a stormy sea to calm the disciples’ fears. Maybe you think of the Jesus who said, “Let the little children come unto me, and forbid them not.” Or the Jesus who, from the cross, forgave those who crucified him. Maybe you think of Jesus the storyteller, who likened the kingdom of God to a great banquet where the least and the last and the lost found places waiting at the table and there was enough for everyone. Maybe you remember the Jesus who gave sight to the blind, healed lepers, and made the lame to walk again, or the Jesus who encouraged us to love our enemies as ourselves, to walk the second mile, and to refuse no one who begs.

So what do we do with today’s Jesus we’ve just read about in this 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew’s gospel – the Jesus who basically calls a woman with a sick child a dog and tells her go away and leave him alone? Mark tells this story too, so it’s not like Matthew just sort of made it up. The story was in circulation, and there is somehow the feel of authenticity to it – after all, why tell an embarrassing and unflattering story about Jesus at all, much less go to the trouble to make one up about him? Fred Craddock says there are just certain verses or stories in the Bible that if he’d been in charge of editing it, wouldn’t have made it into the final edition. This is probably one of them.

In discussing today’s story, Biblical scholars fall all over themselves trying to explain away Jesus’ hostility towards this woman and his downright discourtesy. They say, for example, the Greek word used here for “dog” is really the diminutive, so Jesus was called her a cute, little puppy dog, but hey – cute or not, a dog’s a dog – right? It’s not human, it’s less than human, it sits under the table not at the table, if it’s allowed in the house at all. Jesus flat out calls her a dog and there’s no easy way out of that.

So what’s going on here? Is Jesus just having bad day? Is Matthew saying that even the Son of God gets up on the wrong side of the bed once and awhile? What has brought him to this unflattering and unfortunate moment?

According to Matthew, ever since his baptism by John, Jesus had been focused on what it meant to be the Messiah of the Jews, on what he had to do to bring the Jewish people back to a right relationship with God. It was a difficult time for the Jews, their country occupied by Romans, various groups vying for power and control, calling for a political or military leader to defeat the Romans and restore local Jewish control.

Jesus struggled in the desert with the temptation to become powerful and successful so that he could give the people not what they needed, but what they wanted. But in the end, he chose another, more difficult path – calling his fellow Jews back to faithfulness and right relationship with God through servanthood, forgiveness, and love.

He began to preach this message to his Jewish brothers and sisters in the synagogue, and then on the hillsides. He called Jewish men to be his disciples; he sent those he healed, as in the case of the leper, to be ritually cleansed by the temple priests. In the Sermon on the Mount he preached that the Jewish law must be upheld in the heart and not just given lip service. He said he’d come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.

In that same sermon he warned his Jewish audience not to give “what is holy to dogs,” not to throw “pearls before swine,” and when he sent his disciples out to teach and to heal, he commissioned them specifically to “go nowhere among the gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.”

Matthew, writing for a predominantly Jewish audience, builds a good case for Jesus as the Jewish messiah: Jesus knew his mission; he knew God's will for his life was to call the Jewish people into repentance and right relationship with God.

And then he had this run-in with a Canaanite woman who won't be quiet, who won't go away, and who just keeps on nagging Jesus to do something for her daughter. His first reaction is to ignore her. And then when she doesn't take the hint, to say loudly to his disciples in her presence that she's come to the wrong person – she's a Canaanite – he's a Jew – and he's the Jewish messiah, not everybody's messiah, so he says clearly, lest there be any confusion, "I was sent ONLY to the house of the lost sheep of Israel."

But she still won't go away, and falling to her knees before him, humbling herself, she cries "Lord, help me." And this is where it gets ugly. You know how it is when someone keeps pushing you and you don't know what to do with them. You begin to get angry and defensive. So Jesus snaps, "It's not fair for the children's food to be thrown to the dogs." It would have been nicer if he could have said, gently, "I'm so sorry, but you've confused me with someone else. I'm here to help Jewish people, people just like me; you need to go to your own kind of people for help. Surely there's a Canaanite Aid Society around here somewhere."

I thought about this passage Friday in a strategic planning meeting for the Athens Nurses' Clinic. One of the key questions was: Who is the target group for the clinic's services? Some said it should be only people residing in Athens-Clarke County, and that Barrow, Oglethorpe, Jackson, and the other surrounding counties need to take care of their own. Some said the clinic should be only for those in this country legally; undocumented persons should not be served. Others said, but if someone is sick, how can we turn them away? Who do we help – a select group with the right qualifications, or whoever is in need? It was our question Friday; it was Jesus' question 2000 years ago.

When the Canaanite woman continues to press Jesus, saying "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table," Jesus is forced to face the truth of her assertion. And with that to face his own internalized, unrecognized prejudice. Now I know, you're thinking – how can I say that? Jesus was perfect; he was pure; he never sinned; he didn't have a prejudiced bone in his body. But I think this story tells us something different. Yes, Jesus publically challenged firmly held cultural prejudices often and at considerable risk to his own safety. There also often seemed to be no boundaries that he would not cross for the sake of justice. But then along came this woman, and Jesus encountered an inner boundary that perhaps he didn't even know he had, it was so much a part of his core identity, that identity, that boundary, we all have that says, "our kind is different from your kind: our kind is better than your kind; our kind doesn't mix with your kind; our kind is God's chosen kind." Jesus inherited these values from his family, from his faith, from his traditions, from his culture, and they interfered with his hearing the voice of God crying out to him in the voice of the Canaanite woman. That is the humanity of Jesus.

Earlier in the service, we sang in the hymn "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing" "he breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free; his blood can make the foulest clean; his blood availed for me." This story shows us that Jesus knew the power of sin; he knew first hand the struggle with prejudice and with narrow world views, and with tunnel vision. He came to break the power of this sin, but he could not do it by remaining innocent of it. When we say that Jesus was fully human, we are saying that he had to contend with all the temptations, all the external and internal demons any of us is subject to. And to break the power of prejudice, he had to first face it in himself. Just as to break the ultimate fear of death, he had to face the cross.<sup>1</sup>

It is hard to look into our own hearts and see the blindness, intolerance, and cruelty that reside there. And it is harder still to take responsibility for our blind spots and prejudices. It is easier to accuse others before accusing ourselves. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had said

among all those other good things, “Why do you see the speck that is in your neighbor’s eye but do not notice the log in your own eye? . . . You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.” And now he comes face to face with a log in his own eye. And he shows the courage to take his own advice.

Yes, this story highlights the humanity of Jesus, but if you want to see the divinity of Jesus – then look at how he finally responds to this woman and look how this encounter changed his ministry from then on. He now knows at the deepest level that the love of God, his own love, is for all the world, and not just for folks like him. He tells her, “Great is your faith; Let it be done as you ask.”

If Jesus can admit his vision was too narrow, can we? If Jesus, to be faithful to God, can change his mind and be open to new ideas when faced with unexpected need, can we? It’s not easy. This story shows us how hard it was for Jesus. Sometimes there is anger; sometimes there is fear; sometimes defensiveness, hostility, harsh words. The truth is we all have Canaanite women in our lives, people or situations that we instinctively draw away from, not willing to find room in our hearts for those whom we have always thought were unacceptable, outside the particular social, cultural, political, or religious world we’re comfortable with; those who just don’t fit in to the vision of how we think things are supposed to be, even the way we think God wants them to be. And we wish they’d just go away. Life would be so much simpler without them to bother us. Then we could comfortably do what we want to do rather than what God wants us to do. And yet they continue to burst into our world, yelling “Lord, help me,” even as we resist hearing their call.

So we have the choice to circle our wagons and become defensive and angry, defining ourselves by what we’re against rather than what we’re for. And, we can become increasingly exclusive and dismissive of those who aren’t just like us. Or we can model ourselves after Jesus, who overcame his fear and instinctive dislike for this woman who represented everything he wasn’t, to recognize that the love of God is for everyone, not just a chosen few, and then to live out this change of heart and mind in his life and actions.

After this episode Jesus continued to preach, but with a broader message and to a larger and more inclusive audience. In the verses immediately following today’s reading, Matthew tells us that Jesus healed many and that they praised the God of Israel – language which indicates that there were gentiles in the crowd who were touched by the Jewish Jesus. He stopped using divisive “pearls and swine,” “children and dogs” language. And at the end of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus commissions his disciples one more time. This time there are no restrictions on where to go and whom to evangelize; he simply says, “Go and make disciples of all nations.”

I grew up singing that old hymn, “More like the Master I would surely be. More of his meekness, more humility. More zeal to labor, more courage to be true, more consecration for the work he bids me do.” In light of today’s story, what might that mean for us to become more like the master?

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<sup>1</sup> Wally Fletcher, “Pastoral Implications,” “Proper 15: Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time,” *Lectionary Homiletics*, XVI,v, August-September 2005, 23.