

JESUS LEARNS A LESSON—HOPEFULLY SO DO WE

I almost never start a sermon by going directly to the text. I like to ease you into it with a story or illustration that sets up the basic premise. But this passage from Matthew is so weird, so disturbing, that I thought we should get right down to business. No preliminaries. No niceties. Just right to the scripture.

The lesson is disturbing because it seems to paint Jesus in an entirely different light from that which we are used to. We think of him as warm, welcoming, and radically inclusive. He eats with outcasts. He touches lepers. He has friends who are considered riff-raff by those in the religious establishment. There are even women who are counted among his followers.

But then comes this story of his encounter with a Canaanite woman—and Jesus seems to do an about face—a U-turn. Previously he was warm and accepting, now he appears cold and aloof. It just doesn't fit! So let's look at it more closely.

At this point in Matthew's narrative, Jesus has been badly harassed by the scribes and the Pharisees, the religious authorities of his day. So he and his followers have headed off to the non-Jewish territory of Tyre and Sidon. No self-respecting Pharisee would even set foot in the place! It was foreign territory, but because of that it was also a place of temporary refuge for Jesus.

While we find it shocking that Jesus would react so negatively to this Canaanite woman, it would have come as no surprise to the original readers. After all, Jews and Canaanites had been at odds for centuries! Jesus' near contemporary, the Jewish historian Josephus, reflects this reality when he writes that the Canaanites "have the most ill-feeling towards us." (Quoted by William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible: Matthew*, 1:142)

Jews were carefully taught to despise the Canaanites and the Canaanites were taught to despise the Jews.

Couple that with Jesus' clear sense that his mission was to bring God's Word to his own people, to the Jews, and you begin to see how such an encounter may have happened. Hear it again.

A Canaanite woman approaches Jesus. She is desperate, her daughter is possessed. She clamors for his attention.

But he ignores her. His disciples try to send her off; after all they've come here to get away from demands and challenges. Tell her to leave, they say. But he's not even willing to speak to her.

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," he says. (15:24) My work is among the Jews. I have to remain focused on my primary objective!

But the woman is persistent. She pushes past the disciples, and throws herself at his feet.

"Lord, we're desperate! My daughter really needs your help!"

We can understand things to this point; after all, Jesus is a busy guy! Even in hospital emergency rooms, doctors and nurses engage in triage—some cases take precedence over others. We'd probably let the whole thing go if Jesus made a referral; if he simply said, "I'm sent to help the Jews; perhaps one of your own healers could assist your daughter."

But he doesn't. Instead he responds in what seems like a very crude and cruel manner. He compares the Jews to children, the Canaanites to dogs, and the help he has to offer to food. "It's not fair to throw the children's food to the dogs," he says. (15:26)

We, of course, think well of dogs—especially here in Westport! They are, after all, man's best friend. Young people affectionately refer to one another as "dog"—"Whassup dog?" But back then, while some dogs were household pets, by and large, dogs were seen as dirty and underfoot. To call someone a dog was a real insult.

But the woman is undeterred and offers up the perfect comeback: "Even the dogs get the crumbs that fall off the Master's table!"(15:27)

Jesus is impressed by her persistence. He is moved by her faith. She may be a Canaanite, but she surely loves her daughter—and clearly believes in his ability to bring healing into her life. And so he relents. And the daughter is healed.

So what's going on here? Why does Jesus, warm, welcoming Jesus, respond in such a way to this woman?

Is it, as scholar William Barclay claims, all about tone of voice? Yes, says Barclay, Jesus uses harsh words, but, and I quote, "We can be quite sure that the smile on [his] . . . face and the compassion in his eyes robbed the words of all insult and bitterness." (Ibid) He was, says Barclay, merely testing her, to see if she really believed.

Or, as commentator Eugene Boring contends, is this story essentially made up by Matthew to make a point that, "God has a plan for history in which salvation is offered first to the Jews . . . then broadened to include all nations . . ." (*New Interpreter's Bible*, VIII:337)

Or, is it simply a story that demonstrates that even Jesus was subject to the cultural influences of his day? Is it about influences that he could—and did—ultimately rise above, but nonetheless lessons from childhood that he had to unlearn? Is it the case, as Bruce Chilton says in his book *Rabbi Jesus*, that “the significance of this story is that [Jesus] repented of his own xenophobia”? (181)

We, of course, will never know. And perhaps that’s OK. Perhaps, ultimately, the real purpose of this story is to act as a mirror. For in its rather unsettling way, it reminds us of the powerful hold xenophobia, the fear of strangers, and prejudice has on the world—and on us.

If Jesus could be caught up in the cultural biases of his day, how can we be so naïve as to think we won’t be caught up in our own?

And so, this story calls on each one of us to examine our own hearts and minds. Who are the Canaanites in my life? Who are the people I have relegated to the doghouse? Who are the folks I see as somehow less than fully human? Gay people? Disabled people? Migrant workers? Those who don’t speak English? Rich people? Poor people? Muslims? Jews? Black folks? Old folks? Young folks?

One of the realities of our day is that we are living in a nation that is increasingly diverse. Its not just Canaanites and Jews—its all sorts of people. This past week the U.S. Census Bureau issued a report which indicated that minority groups that collectively now compose 1/3 of our population, will become the majority by 2042. Non-Hispanic whites now make up 66% of the population, by 2042, that will fall to under 50%. By then, Blacks, Asians and Hispanics combined will constitute the majority.

The bottom line is clear, how we deal with xenophobia, with prejudice, with stereotypes, will determine the future health and well-being of our nation, and in turn, our world.

If, like Jesus, we are willing to learn a new lesson, if we are willing to change, if we are willing to see past our differences and embrace our commonalities, then there will be healing and health. If not, to use a phrase, our nation will go to the dogs.

The choice is ours.

Jesus learned a lesson—hopefully, so do we.

Amen

John H. Danner