

A Different Kind of Sheep

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Grace Church in New York
Ninth Sunday After Pentecost
August 14, 2011

In our passage from Matthew's Gospel, you heard Jesus say to the disciples, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." When Jesus assembled the twelve disciples in chapter 10 of Matthew's Gospel, he instructed them to "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Not only are Gentiles excluded from the mission and ministry but the Samaritans are especially scourged and singled out to be avoided. Today the Canaanite woman, fearing for her daughter's well being, might well have been outright dismissed by our Lord and Savior when he refers to her and "her kind" as dogs. Jesus says this after he ignores her initial petition for help. What's going on here? Who is this exclusive minded and exclusive sounding Christ figure? I do believe that we need to do some cautious sleuthing around in this Gospel reading.

As is so frequently the case with trying to read and interpret Scripture, different meanings may be found on various levels. For example, we should look into this passage with an eye on the social and cultural signals that are going off. Jesus and his all male entourage of Jewish disciples are essentially accosted by a non-Jewish woman. Not only is she not a Jew, she is a Canaanite woman. The Jews and Canaanites were long standing enemies with deep suspicions and an antagonistic history between the two different peoples. The Canaanites were, after all, the vilest of pagans and idol worshippers in the eyes of God's chosen people, Israel. How could such a person dare to approach Jesus and his followers. It is a preposterous picture. Not only were there the cultural distinctions that would argue against this contact between Jew and Canaanite, there was also the gender matter. It was not socially acceptable for a woman to directly approach a group of men as we have happening today in our Gospel story. Jesus himself would appear to be quite complicit in contributing to the male hierarchy that dominated society and religion at the time. Indeed, it appears that the disciples proposed to do what any bunch of guys would have done at the time. Show the Canaanite woman straight to the exit. They say to Jesus "Send her away." They note the "shouting" manner in which the woman has confronted Jesus and the disciples. I get a chuckle out of the translation from the Greek meaning that the woman "was crying out saying" into "started shouting" in our English Bible. Similarly, the disciples observe in the Greek that the woman "cries out after us" then the English translators stuck with the attention grabber "shouting." We get the point that the woman, given social and religious practices, had to really be emphatic in order to get a hearing from and with Jesus.

So the stage is set with this potentially uncomfortable stand off between a group of Jewish males and a distraught Gentile female. This is one of only two situations in Matthew's Gospel where a non-Jewish person is involved in conversation seeking the help of Jesus. The other is the centurion who sought and received Jesus' aid in the healing of the centurion's servant. Matthew's Gospel is very much about the trials and tribulations of the largely Jewish community of the evangelist emerging as followers of the Messiah under intense pressures about their Jewish identity. Yet here we have a meaningful departure from the narrative involving someone who was about as foreign as you could imagine.

What happens? Jesus entirely ignores her initial request, although he does not send her away as the disciples had suggested. But he does reiterate the Jewish nature of his mission and that of the disciples as being directed only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." As Jesus ordered the disciples to go out and make theirs an exclusive mission only to Jews, today Jesus

sets himself out in the same exclusive position saying this is what his Father, God, intended for his son, the Messiah. I believe this demonstrates the gender friction that we have forced ourselves to live with when we continually ascribe human features to things not human. Such as God, the Divine Being. Of course, Jesus has already begun to build the church on Peter the rock to continue the bias toward male leadership. This is the long male line that the Canaanite woman is confronting and holding to task. I for one, will cast my lot with her and the likes of the three lovely young females who we baptized this morning; Alexis, Alice and Alexandra when it comes to holding the church and one another accountable here in the kin-dom of God. Please note that I have appropriated a turn of the word kingdom by broadening it for all humankind as kin with one another. Thus our kin-dom. A wonderful theologian and ethicist coined the term in her feminist theology work. I heartily embrace her thinking and her point.

So Jesus has ignored the Canaanite woman's opening plea but he has not dismissed her. She seeks his help yet again "Lord, help me." Look at the response. Jesus takes a rather derogatory swipe at her by holding up the chosen people, the children of Israel, over and against the dogs that are other kinds of people. Now the defining moment of the passage. Undaunted, the Canaanite woman clearly, calmly and reverently says "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." I think the silence of the disciples is deafening. I can picture their jaws dropping to the ground. Or perhaps they simply don't get it. But Jesus finally does the right thing for the woman, her daughter, and all of us. He acknowledges our faith and heals us all instantly. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

Oh Jesus. Why did you string us along like that.

The Canaanite woman has taken action on our behalf to get the Lord's attention and allow that in God's abundance there is more than enough love, grace and mercy to go around to people other than the children of the house of Israel. We unworthy dogs may find sustenance in the crumbs from our Lord's table. But it took her bold and unwavering action to do so. Against the odds and practices in society and the church. Was she rebellious. Was she being rude. Yes. We can continually use such a reminder about being bold concerning our faith. Any person who walks into this church should be welcomed and be able to rest assured that we are all equal in the spiritual journeys we are walking with our faith in the risen Jesus.

We have now looked at this Gospel passage with large and important social and cultural issues before us. Lets drop down to a very personal level and think about the story in a different way. The way that I would like to now travel with you is to hold up the prayerful nature of this story. The unwritten personal interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. We get telltale indications of this and it is well worth our attention. Between the annoyed disciples and Jesus' own insistence about his exclusive mission, there is a personal spiritual exchange that takes place. The woman sure knows how to pray to her Lord and Savior.

Look how this foreigner, this pagan, addresses Jesus right away. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." She recognizes and attributes to Jesus the divine presence that he is. How surprising. Is this what strikes Jesus dumb? Then before she addresses Jesus again, she kneels before him. This surely emphasizes her prayerful preparedness for her petition for healing help from our Lord. She is no stranger to faith in Jesus Christ through the God of Israel. As she is kneeling before him, she directs her particular appeal to him, "Lord, help me." Heal my tormented daughter with your great salvific power. The Canaanite woman is no stranger to faithful prayer. She has somehow been following Jesus and his many miraculous healing actions and teachings and instructions to pray in some manner. She would not just show up and present her request in this formal and studied prayerful manner if she had not already been exercising her faith in God in Christ.

But what is Jesus up to? Here the Canaanite woman has properly addressed him with her prayer petitions “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David.” “Lord, help me.” And how does Jesus answer? “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” You have got to be kidding me! Is he beginning to sense that the woman has faith and now is the time to test her further in standard rabbinic tradition? Well the Canaanite woman, practiced in her prayer routine, and evidently a darn quick study, comes right back at Jesus. “Yes, Lord, yet even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” She might as well be a student at the feet of her teacher. What a remarkable and faithful response. Mere crumbs of Jesus’ love and grace have sustained the Canaanite woman’s faith and brought her here, to the feet of the Messiah, to seek his help. Finally, Jesus acts. “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” In completing this encounter, Jesus is responding to the prayers of one of God’s faithful people and contrasting her great faith to the uncertain – at best - faith of his very own disciples. Thank you Jesus.

Earlier this week, as I was just beginning to stir my thinking and praying about this Gospel passage and sermon, I enjoyed fellowship over lunch with a retired priest who was actually ordained here at Grace Church about forty years ago. When I heard him mention that he is also preaching today, I could not resist asking him his thoughts about Jesus and the Canaanite woman’s faith. He allowed that he is focusing on the Isaiah passage and a justice theme in his sermon. He did allow that he is surprised that the early church powers that be permitted this Gospel passage to make it into the Canon. I was fascinated by this observation. It underscored the radical nature of the encounter and the hope that it would provide for those members of Matthew’s community who didn’t happen to be Jewish but were Gentiles. This is our hope in faith too. No matter where we come from on our faith journeys, if we prayerfully petition Jesus to help us we may be assured that he will do so.

The retired priest’s comments prompted me to look again at the Isaiah passage. When I did, I felt like Dorothy at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*. As she stands before Glinda after her companions have received their gifts, the Lion his courage, the Scarecrow his brains and the Tinman his heart, Dorothy, sounding forlorn, asks what she is to receive. Glinda simply says that she has had her gift to get home to Kansas with her all along. It is the ruby slippers. I needed only to look back at Isaiah in the Old Testament today to fully appreciate God’s openness to one and all. The Isaiah passage is an oracle of inclusion. In it we hear that God’s house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. It is my prayer today that we, God’s people here at Grace Church, take this to heart and mind and action as we seek to spread the kin-dom of God welcoming one another and all people as we welcomed the newly baptized at the 9 a.m. service. We receive you into the household of God. Confess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood.

AMEN