

SLD10.19.08 29th Ordinary
Emory Presbyterian Church
Matthew 15:21-28
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“But You Promised!”

Got another tough one today. Not a parable this time; just another difficult scene with Jesus, one in which, you might say, I *have* said, he’s not at his best. For our visitors, for weeks now we’ve been schlepping through Jesus’ relentless parables; in fact, we still have a handful to go before the relief, if you can call it that, of the darkness of Advent.

If you’ve been around, you know why I call the recent parables “relentless” - in them, Jesus is most definitely *not* in gentle shepherd mode. Rather he seems to be in a rather flaming mode of “I’m over y’all not getting what is expected of you,” reeling off an incessant litany of peppery, even accusatory, parables to drive the point home. And if his pointed parables are generally addressed to temple authorities, yet the ears of his disciples, then and now, listening in, cannot help but burn with an awareness of how we ourselves do not measure up.

Love God. Forgive each other. Be grateful for life, *your* life. Don’t judge other people. Pray. Change. Get over yourself. Get along with each other. Get going with what’s important – and hint: it has to do with God. And then last week, in Ashley’s sermon (for which I did NOT set her up but DID welcome her exegetical company) in which I heard, “Don’t take God’s invitation to the Kingdom for granted; it may not be for everyone. When you receive an invite, you’d better belly up. And with intention. Because God’s not messing around.”

And speaking of God not messing around and maybe not extending an invitation to just everybody, today's text certainly echoes that point, at least initially. Where it ends up, of course, is the same place all the gospel texts end up – pointing to the grace of God in Christ Jesus. But it sure takes an uncomfortable minute to get there.

Read text Matthew 15:21-28

This text of Matthew's made me SO uncomfortable when I was in seminary that I could hardly bear it. Couldn't get past it. Dwelled on it. Mined that miserable minute for all it was worth. Preached a whole sermon about it, in fact, for my Professional Assessment, no less – that senior year ritual at Candler in which a discerning covey of illuminati determine whether or not you're ready to be launched into the world of professional ministry. Upon hearing my sermon on, that group of august elders said, kindly, "You know what? How about you give that another shot."

I was so mad. All wound up in a righteous swivet against my own temple authorities. I mean, all I'd said was that the woman had caught Jesus with his compassion down (which I still say she did. I mean, what's wrong with that? If the guy's fully human, why can't he have a bad day like the rest of us?). And okay, I also remarked in that sermon that Jesus called the woman a "bitch."

But listen, let me explain. First of all, if I were mad at the guys and gals calling the shots around Candler, I was even madder at Jesus. The way I saw it, here's this frantic woman desperate to find assistance for her tormented daughter who kneels before a holy man she's confident can help, and all he's got to say to her is, "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the *dogs*?" You know any other name for a female dog?

Myself, I think I had a point. Maybe not the most important point but still, a pretty inescapable one.

At the very least it seems clear that Jesus sees himself as called only to redeem the “lost sheep of the children of Israel.” And as a Canaanite pagan, the woman doesn’t qualify. But guess what – as gentile Christians, neither do you and I. Despite the fact that gentile Christians today claim with confidence, even exclusivity, Jesus as our own, it sure appears there was a time when Jesus would not have claimed us as his.

Hopefully it’s not news to anyone that the historical Jesus was not a Christian but a Jew. And not just any sort of 1st century Palestinian Jew, but an *apocalyptic* Jew. Which means Jesus likely believed that the end times were just around the corner, which, in a sense, I suppose they are. But the urgency behind Jesus’ preaching and teaching, the focus of his ministry, the passion and determination of his path was not metaphorical or speculative but catapulted from a deep and genuine conviction that the coming of God’s Kingdom was imminent. God’s Kingdom would come any day now – Jesus himself was a glimpse of it – and the apocalypse, the drama, the chaos of the Revelation would come first. The lost sheep of Israel needed to get their act together, and in short order.

Parable, parable, miracle, Word. So much lostness, so little time. Who was this woman calling after him for healing? Not a Jew. Worse, a Canaanite. A pagan. A baal worshipper. “Send her away!” urges his disciples. “Get lost,” says Jesus. “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs!”

What’s more, irony of ironies – Matthew’s or Jesus,’ I don’t know – in the pericope immediately preceding, Jesus has just given a rather harsh dressing down to

his dimwitted disciples for not understanding what he means when he says, “It’s not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person but what comes *out* of it. Because what comes out of the mouth,” he says, “proceeds from the heart.”

And what Jesus says, ostensibly from his heart to the desperate heart of the Canaanite woman is, “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the *dogs*.”

What’s wrong with this picture? What is wrong with Jesus? In seminary, I couldn’t bear the dissonance. I’m not too wild about it now. But the story doesn’t end there, does it.

It might have. Honestly, it’d even be understandable if it did, wouldn’t it? Anybody who experiences a genuine sense of call to God’s work knows that even as it includes some things, it excludes others. None of us can be all things to all people. If you think you can, try being a parish minister. Or a parent. Or a lover. Or a student. Or a friend. In fact, just try being whatever and whoever you are in *any* realm of your life and you’re bound to be slapped upside the head with your limitations.

The way I see it, Jesus, too, cannot be, does not want to be, was not sent to be, all things to all people. But the Word of God that was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, and through whom all things came into being, that Word apparently responds to any cry from the heart, regardless of demographic. Certainly this Canaanite woman, heart bursting with urgency for her daughter, determines to claim God’s grace through Jesus, whether he’s up for it or not.

Turns out he is.

And who knows? Maybe Jesus knew what he was doing all along. Maybe his initial response to the woman is more for educational purposes – a reflection back to his

followers, an echo of their own urgent desire to draw boundaries around who has access to Jesus and who does not. I'm not real keen on using a desperate woman as an object lesson for dimwitted disciples, but maybe Jesus catches on early to the depth and determination of the woman's faith. Maybe he's convinced up front that she's not going to be put off by a mere gaggle of fussy guys telling her to go away. Maybe Jesus perceives from the beginning that the Canaanite woman will persist in demanding the promise in a way that his disciples have not yet, that a mere lack of understanding isn't going to slow her down, that what will come out of her mouth will come straight from her heart to his, and witnessing this, maybe the disciples would finally get it.

"It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," he said.

To which the woman replies, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

"Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

I love this woman. Call her names if you like, Jesus, but she's back at ya' with repartee that serves her goal. Impervious to the insult, or simply sidestepping it, she still manages to convey what she needs Jesus to understand – that however he might see her, yet Jesus is her master. Jesus is the woman's Master. However he sees her (or whatever he calls her) she sees *him* for who he is – her Lord. Her Baal. Her God. The One who can save. The One who can heal. Deliver. And knowing what she knows, and needing what she needs, the Canaanite woman musters all her courage and all her wit and unequivocally *claims* it from the One, the only One who can deliver.

Even just a *crumb* from you, Jesus. Just a *touch* of the hem of your garment, a glance in a crowd, a word, a breath, the tiniest *mustard* seed of your attention is enough

to save the woman's daughter. To save the woman. To save the disciples. To save you and me and all humanity, all creation, all that is and was and ever will be. The merest *molecule* of a crumb of a crumb of the Word of God caught in the tire of a Prius passing down N. Decatur in the middle of a rainy night is enough to save, heal, redeem, reconcile and otherwise satisfy the raving hunger of the whole of creation - and the woman knows it.

Do the disciples know it? "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."

Does Jesus even know it? Well, if he doesn't, the woman sure sets him straight!

But I have a hunch he knew it all along, don't you?

"Woman, great is your faith!" he says with an exclamation point, before his gaping disciples. "Let it be done for you as you wish."

And it was. Her daughter was healed instantly.

And it is. We, too, are healed instantly by the merest crumb from the Master's table. This is Jesus' promise to those whose hearts reach to his with the faith and trust and surrender of the Canaanite woman; it is the promise made to each of us in our baptism, the promise we claimed today for Miles Patrick.

But listen, in case the challenges and rigors and disappointments of life make you suspect that maybe Jesus has forgotten God's promise through him, or is distracted, or otherwise occupied, feel free to take a cue from the Canaanite woman and set him straight, saying, "remember Jesus, you *promised!*"

To the glory of God. Amen.