

August 17, 2014 - Matthew 15:10--28
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Out of the Mouth

In today's gospel reading, the Pharisees take offense at Jesus. I do, too. I'm referring to the part about the Canaanite woman who is begging for help, about how she's treated—and not just by the disciples, by Jesus, too. First he ignores her, then he tells her that he came for Israelites, not Canaanites; then he likens her to a dog. I take offense at a woman being likened to dog. You know people say that, sometimes. They'll call a woman, especially a persistently demanding woman, like this Canaanite woman, a particular word for a female dog.

That's not the word that Jesus uses. That's not the connotation of the word that Jesus uses. It would be an anachronism to import that sense into the text. Still, I don't think there's any getting around it, this story is strange. I have to wonder why it's part of the gospel, what it's saying, what Jesus is saying, why this comes out of his mouth.

In what may seem irony, today's passage begins with Jesus saying, "Watch what comes out of your mouth!" This is before the part with the Canaanite woman. In fact, this takes place in another location altogether; this part is in Jerusalem, after a conversation with scribes and Pharisees. Debriefing that conversation with the disciples, Jesus says, "You shouldn't worry about what goes in your mouth—how you follow religious dietary laws. Rather, you should worry about what comes out of your mouth—the words you say." Jesus is critiquing the way that religious rules can work against the ultimate goal of religion, which is living a life that praises God and blesses others.

The gospel's first audience would be listening carefully here. Some of those most divisive issues for the early church were about food, whether one needed to follow Jewish dietary laws once you became a Christian, and whether it was okay to eat food that had been sacrificed to idols. First century Christians were concerned about the boundaries of God's holy people, about the relationship between God's covenant with Israel and the revelation of God in Christ. (See also Romans chapters nine and eleven.)

Since we are not first century Christians, since there have been centuries of distance between then and now, and since in those intervening centuries the relationship between Jews and Christians has too often been worse, not better, it's worth reiterating that Jesus was a Jew. Sometimes, we can make so much of a contrast between Jesus and the Pharisees that we forget that. As he made this critique, Jesus was speaking from within that very religion. Jesus word's echo another Jew, Isaiah, who had the same critique from the very same place, Jerusalem. Like Isaiah, Jesus was standing on the holy ground of the holy land and saying incredibly surprising, even offensive, things about what makes you holy.

And then Jesus goes outside of the holy land, outside its boundaries, to the land of Tyre and Sidon, to the land of the Canaanites, who had been enemies of Israel for centuries and centuries. That Jesus is even there, outside the boundaries of Israel, is surprising.

Perhaps even more surprising is the woman he encounters there. Perhaps even more surprising is her boldness, and cleverness, and certainness.

What comes out of her mouth, what she says, has three parts to it. First she identifies him, "Lord, Son of David!" Then, she asks him for help, "Have mercy on me, my daughter is tormented by a demon!" Finally, she concludes that he can and will help her. She even says this part with an air of playfulness, "Even dogs get crumbs from the master's table." This woman knows who Jesus is and what he can and will do.

It's interesting to contrast her awareness with that of the disciples'—or perhaps I should say, with the disciples' lack of awareness. Return to the first part of the reading today. In his debrief with the disciples, Jesus uses what seems to me a pretty self-explanatory expression. Jesus says, "It's like the blind leading the blind. They'll both fall into a pit." To which Peter says, "Can you explain that?" Not him at his most clever. Or a bit before today's reading, the story of the feeding of the 5,000, which we heard two weeks ago. The disciples lack awareness there, too. They are aware of the late hour, and of the desolate location, and of the large crowd, but they're not aware of Jesus. They doubt that much can be done with five loaves and two fish. They say, "Send the crowds away." Notice that's what the disciples say in today's reading, too, "Send her away!"

What a contrast with the Canaanite woman. Forget loaves, she is happy with crumbs. Crumbs are fine, she says, "Lord, I know who you are, and I know what you can do. I know you can work with crumbs."

That's what comes out of her mouth. What comes out of her mouth is faith. What comes out of her mouth is recognition of God, request for help, and conviction of God's effectiveness. That's faith, Jesus says, commending her, "Woman, great is your faith!" Contrast that to what Jesus said to Peter in the gospel just last week. When Peter tries to walk on water and starts to sink, Jesus says, "You of little faith!" To probably the most well-known disciple, one of the inner circle, the one who gets named in the gospels all the time, to Peter, Jesus says, "You of little faith!" But to an otherwise unknown and unnamed Canaanite woman, Jesus says, "Great is your faith!"

I still don't know why at first he likens her to a dog. Biblical commentators point out the actual word is "little dog," a house dog, or a puppy. For animal lovers, maybe that conjures up tender, affectionate feelings. Think of the millions of YouTube videos of adorable animals, how many pictures people take of their pets. There is something surprisingly dear about a playful little dog. Seeing them seems to make people of any temperament and age say, "Awww." But I suspect importing that sense into the gospel is anachronistic as well. Biblical commentators also note that the word "little dog" was an unflattering term for outsiders.

We can't know the inner workings of Jesus' mind in the midst of this conversation. Was he deliberately insulting this woman, maybe as a way of testing her? Or was Jesus being instructed, Jesus coming to greater understanding of his own divine identity as both Son of David and Lord of all? We don't know. Either suggestion might sound offensive. We do know that because of this woman's faith, mercy and healing come about.

In all its strangeness, ultimately this story witnesses to the ultimate expansiveness of God's grace, the ultimate expansiveness of grace—and the strange and surprising way that grace comes to expression. God's grace is expressed through the ongoing and invested involvement of humans. God works with human beings, God works in conversations, with a Canaanite woman. Someone outside of the promise, outside of the boundaries, helps spread, even expand the promise, expand the boundaries.

Boundaries are still a cause of offense for Christians. Maybe food issues are not so divisive. Race is. Sex is. We, too, must engage in conversations about religious rules and rituals, whether and how they support, or conflict, with the ultimate goal of religion, which is praising God and blessing others.

Today's gospel offers two options on boundaries: you can send outsiders away, or you can learn from an outsider: you can persistently demand God's grace, you can recognize, request, and trust. You know which one is faithful.