



Scripture and Sermon

August 16, 2020

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Matthew 15:10-28

10 Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: **11** it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." **12** Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" **13** He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. **14** Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." **15** But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." **16** Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? **17** Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? **18** But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. **19** For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. **20** These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. **22** Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." **23** But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." **24** He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." **25** But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." **26** He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." **27** She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." **28** Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Complex and Surprising God,

Thank you for this chance to dig into, discuss, and learn from your word. Bless this time and be present with us, help us to be open to what you want us to hear this morning.

Open our hearts and minds to receive and grow.

In your son's name, Amen.

Disclaimer: when I decided on the scripture for this week, the lectionary gave me the option of using verses 10-20 or not. At the time that I made that decision I was hoping to talk about all of it, and pull the ideas together. Well, there is just too much going on in 21-28 to touch on everything. I am not going to ignore verses 10-20, but they will not be the focus. If you have any burning questions about those verses, please let me know and I will do my best to give you a good answer.

Disclaimer complete, I'm not going to beat around the bush and start with some little story this week, I've got to get right to it. That story I just read is YIKES right? That is not a good look for Jesus. Did he just call a woman a dog right after warning that it is what comes out of our mouth that defiles?? Did she correct him or outwit him? Did she change Jesus's mind and have to convince him to have mercy on her?

This passage is a TOUGH one. I have spent a good amount of time researching on this passage from plenty of perspectives, and it seems like no one fully agrees on the point of this passage. Why is this story kept as part of the gospel? What are we supposed to learn from it? No one fully agrees. So I am going to be real right here, this is a passage, perhaps even more than others, that I don't know if any of us will have it completely right until we can hear the answer from Jesus's lips. That said, I am going to share some thoughts and potential conclusions based on the many ideas that were shared with me this week.

This passage is full of insider information, so I am going to walk us through the passage a bit. Let's begin at the start of chapter 15, since we didn't read that part, but it's important to understanding the conversation that happens later. A quick summary, the Pharisees and Scribes challenge Jesus asking why his disciples do not maintain the Jewish elder's tradition of washing their hands before they eat. Basically saying, hey, your people aren't eating the right food, the right way, with the right people. Jesus then outwits them by pointing out that they are not perfect at upholding the law either, particularly in the ways they do not honor their father and mother. This interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees is typical. Someone challenges Jesus to a battle of wits, there may be a bit of an exchange, but it ends with Jesus making a mic drop statement they can't refute.

So then, in verse 10, Jesus turns to the crowd and teaches them about what he was getting at with the Pharisees and Scribes, saying that salvation doesn't come from following the rituals like kosher law and hand washing, but that it is more about what comes from us, from our heart that is what will make or break us. Then the disciples come up and highlight that the Pharisees were offended, not surprising in my opinion. Jesus's response points us back to the parable of the wheat and the weeds that we talked about the last time we had Zoom church, again insisting that we are not to worry about those that are the weeds, that it is God's responsibility. Here Jesus uses the phrase blind guiding the blind. Again, this part is not the focus for today, so I will not dwell here, but this could be its own sermon. Then Peter asks him to explain. A frequent occurrence it seems in Matthew. Jesus explains the parable, indicating that it is not the rituals and rules that define our holiness or salvation, but that what we act on or say does, because those things come from how we truly are on the inside.

That brings us to the last part of this section of chapter 15. Jesus withdraws again. Similar to after he found out about the killing of John. Similar to how he withdrew after the feeding of the five thousand, before walking out on the water. Though, those times he didn't get much of a break. So now, after another many healings and this round of arguing with the Pharisees, he is ready for a break away from the Jewish lands. So he goes to Tyre and Sidon, known Gentile territory. Being gentile territory, we can know that this area is inhabited by those that were supposedly outside of Jesus's mission, as he had been sent for "God's chosen people, the Jews." But also, the gentiles were those who were considered particularly unclean. This is compounded by the way that the woman is identified as a "Canaanite." Apparently, by the time Jesus was walking around the holy land, the term Canaanite was out of date. I heard it compared to calling New York, New Amsterdam. So, there is a purpose for Matthew, in writing her as a Canaanite, instead of Syrophenician as this story goes in the Gospel of Mark. Using the term Canaanite, implies an enemy status, as the Israelites and Canaanites were long-time enemies in the Old Testament stories. Another potential connection here is that we are to think of Rahab who is one of the 4 women listed in Jesus's genealogy at the beginning of Matthew. Rahab was a Canaanite living in Jericho who is a crucial part of Jesus's lineage, we know that must be true because she was included on the family tree even though she was a woman. So, perhaps we are also to make that connection and be alerted that there is something different about this gentile woman.

So, she comes running up to Jesus, shouting! "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." There are a couple of interesting things in this first call. First, the "Have mercy on me, Lord" is a classic Jewish prayer seen aplenty in the Psalms. So she, a non-Jewish woman, is approaching Jesus with this very Jewish phrase. Following that, she calls Jesus "Son of David." Not, Rabbi, teacher, healer, that famous dude everyone is on about. She identifies him as the Son of David,

this indicates that she knows who Jesus is. Not just someone special, but that she knows he is the Messiah. As one of the main prophecies of the messiah is that he would be a Son of David. This is particularly intriguing as in the Gospel of Matthew, we do not yet know if even the Disciples fully understand who Jesus is. It isn't until chapter 16, chronologically after this interaction that Jesus asks the disciples "who do you say that I am?" and Peter responds with, "You are the Messiah." So here is this outsider woman running at Jesus, praying a Jewish prayer, naming Jesus for who he truly was, and then asking for healing for her daughter.

This is where Jesus starts to look bad. He ignores her and keeps walking. Nevertheless she persisted. Calling out after them asking for healing for her daughter. Jesus doesn't respond until the disciples chip in, encouraging Jesus to send her away because she was a nuisance. He answers, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." AKA "I was sent only for the Jewish people." She then prostrated herself, getting on her knees and begs, "Lord, help me." Still using a typical Jewish prayer form. Brace yourselves for the worst of it, Jesus responds, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." With this phrase, the Jews are the Children, and all others are the dogs. Some try to lighten the weight of this statement by highlighting that the greek word we have translated to dog here is actually the diminutive, or meaning little dogs or puppies, they then argue that Jesus was being more endearing here. Others say that calling someone a dog is an insult no matter what flattering words you put around it. She responds, accepting the analogy, and says, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." So this whole dialogue is interesting. Remember how I said that the dialogue between Jesus and the Pharisees was a typical structure for a battle of wits used throughout the Jesus story? So we see that structure again here, but instead of someone else instigating the challenge, it is Jesus that throws the challenge, and instead of Jesus getting the last word, it is the woman who makes the winning argument that Jesus then does not rebut. Perhaps this is a purposeful parallel, to make sure that we connect these stories, and see this interaction with the woman as a reversal.

Jesus's response to her is "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." The text says that her daughter was healed instantly. Many people try to soften this passage by saying that this conclusion means that Jesus said all those things to test her faith, he was pushing back on her to see if she had enough. There are a couple issues with this interpretation. First, there is no testing language in the passage, and usually when Jesus is testing, it is indicated. Also, she does not make a confession of faith, so does not claim faith herself. Second, it implies that she had to pass the test for her daughter to earn healing. When we accept that interpretation we are implying to those in a similar situation to the woman, with a loved one suffering or dying, that if their loved one is not healed it is because they did not have enough faith

and persistence to convince Jesus to save them. That's painful and harmful and not how we believe Jesus works outside of this passage. So, what do these last lines mean? Here's a few tidbits that give us some direction.

Jesus praises her with "Woman, great is your faith!" First, this is a phrase used only one other time in Matthew, in chapter 8, when the Centurion asks Jesus to heal his servant. Another non-Jewish person who Jesus responded the same to after being convinced to heal someone else from afar. This phrase is only given to these two and not to any of Jesus' disciples, supposedly his best believers. This line comes only a chapter after or a short time after chronologically, Jesus's interaction with the disciples while walking on the water where he says to Peter, Disciple Peter, St. Peter, "You of little faith." So, this is quite the contrast. Peter was of little faith but this outsider, unclean gentile is of great faith? Perhaps we ought to compare what she got right while Peter got it wrong. One of the things we talked about last week, was that Peter's true lack of faith wasn't faltering on the water, but in feeling the need to test Jesus, by saying "if you are Jesus, have me walk on the water with you." Meanwhile, the woman did not do any testing, she boldly claimed Jesus as Messiah, as Lord, and fully believed that he had the power to save her daughter. And so, her daughter is healed.

So what does it mean all together? One of the things that a lot of people have concluded is that this passage is evidence that Jesus could change his mind, even about something as big as who he was sent to serve. The argument is compelling, but does imply that Jesus then was messing up by responding to her the way he did, calling her a dog. This implies an imperfection of Jesus that some find intriguing and hopeful. It doesn't sit right with me. In my research, I listened to a podcast by Luther Seminary faculty on this passage. One of those professors is a black woman, and she shared her personal experience with this passage and shared that she cannot accept an interpretation that implies that Jesus, our divine savior, would have to be convinced by the marginalized woman that she has worth and is made in the image of God. If we accept the interpretation that Jesus messed up, that Jesus said and meant those insults and really meant to not answer her plea, that his mind was changed by the persistence and sharing of the suffering of the woman, then we are accepting that our God had to be convinced of her and her daughter's worth.

What's the alternative then? When we look at this whole series of events and stories, there is a very different message. This series starts with the Pharisees and Scribes thinking they know it all and are the best. They look down on Jesus and his followers. He then puts them in place through the battle of wits. Then the Disciples ask for an interpretation, highlighting that the Pharisees seemed put out. He then explains his comments to them, basically saying, they have it wrong, it isn't about all these rituals, what God cares about is the intentions in our heart. This flips the pride to the Disciples. By speaking against the Pharisees, the Disciples feel vindicated. So now,

they take a break in Tyre and Sidon. And this unclean woman comes up wanting to be included in the ministry of Jesus. What did Jesus just say about interacting with things that are unclean again? Was it, “send it away!!” Hmmmm... don’t think so. But here the Disciples are, after this whole lesson from Jesus on how the Pharisees are not doing the right thing by focusing on keeping away from the unclean and are acting in ways that are more dishonoring, seeing this Canaanite woman and reacting with scorn and dismissal. So, Jesus leans into it, ready to teach them a lesson. He speaks what they were thinking, “Jesus was sent only for the Jewish people, not people like you” and when she keeps up, he digs further in their mindset about her, “It isn’t fair to share the food that is for the Jewish people and give it to the dogs like you.” I imagine with this interpretation that at this juncture the Disciples are thinking something like “Sick burn!” No matter what his plan, Jesus did still say those things to her, so my hope is that it is because Jesus, sharing God’s omniscience, or all knowing, knows that she is a sassy lady and she is ready to stand up and win the battle of wits. And so she does, she sasses back, saying, “Fine Jesus, I am a dog in your presence, but even dogs get the leftovers. You have more than enough to at least give me the crumbs.” She wins the battle of the wits and with that, the Disciples, and their desire to ignore her and send her away, are put in their place. Jesus praises her great faith, really rubbing it in for these Disciples who he said had “little faith” recently while walking on the water. Jesus is also saying that this woman, though the least expected to have it, has great faith. She recognizes who Jesus is and what he can do, and wants to be a part of it. The Disciples shouldn’t be getting cocky, feeling so much better and smarter or correct than the Pharisees. They have their own learning to continue doing.

So, that was a lot of the details, in the weeds of this passage. What does it all mean for us today? I read it as a similar challenge to us. Who are we looking at and making a snap judgment about? What types of people or people groups do we think are outside the reach of Jesus or outside of who should be included in the church? Who are we comparing ourselves to so that we feel assured that we are not so wrong like them? Do we have faith like Peter or like this Canaanite woman? Are we unsure of if Jesus is there and who he is? Or do we have faith that Jesus is our Messiah, divine and powerful, able to bring healing and acceptance for all? It is not just a challenge that we are given in this story. We are also told in this story that Jesus is not against a sassy, smart woman (that’s a phew from me!). Jesus flips expectations and welcomes his woman into the cloud of witnesses. Jesus accepted her, even though she was looked down on by the traditions of the religious of that time. Jesus sets the standard for us, drawing the circle wide and wider still. To follow in Jesus’s lessons, we, too, must be open to accepting the faith of the unexpected, to learning from the faith of the outsider, and to continuing our own learning about what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Let us pray,

Sassy and Table-turning God,

What an interaction Jesus had with the Canaanite woman. Jesus surely knew what he was doing, even if we are not able to figure it out for sure these many years later. Thank you for all the many that have spent time in your word working hard to make sense of passages like these. Thank you for this space where we can question what a passage means, question traditional interpretations, and find new things to learn about you, your son, and what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Thank you for drawing your circle wide, for including all in your saving work. Help us to hear the challenge to us today that comes from this passage. Help us to not think too highly of ourselves or our faith. Help us to welcome in the outsider instead of wishing them to go away. Help us to have great faith like the unnamed gentile woman. We know that you work in unexpected and mysterious ways sometimes, we will be on the lookout for where you are at work near each of us and within our church. We ask that you continue the work that you have started in each one of us. We pray all these things in in the name of your Son and Spirit, Amen.