

March 6, 2016

"The Gospel for Yelping Puppies"

Matthew 15:21-28

Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

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Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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."

But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, she keeps shouting after us."

He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."

He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Our worship theme this Lentecost Season has been 'The Jesus Diaries, Personal Encounters with Our Living Lord.' As you have tracked the Gospel stories we have shared thus far, you might be able to detect a certain pattern in these encounters. It goes something like this...

Jesus is confronted by someone's dire need, illness, demon possession or hunger. But the religious authorities forbid his exercise of mercy; it is the Sabbath, or the person is unacceptable. Jesus then counters. He asks, 'What is more important, the Law or this person, right here in front of you, now?' The answer is clear; the person is healed, exorcised, or fed. Jesus is vindicated, he has done right in the eyes of God and the people; his enemies fume, and plots develop to do away with Jesus.

Scholars call these episodes 'Controversy Narratives.' That makes sense to me.

But if you notice in the story we just shared, we have a Controversy Narrative, in reverse. Here, Jesus is the Law Keeper, the stickler for rules, and the unnamed Canaanite woman wins both the debate about mercy and healing for her daughter.

It's an unexpected encounter, quite unlike any other in the New Testament, and good for us to hear.

To set the scene: Jesus and the disciples have traveled into new territory, 'Tyre and Sidon' being code words for 'Paganland'- outside the geographical circle of comfort for Jews. This is something new.

And out of nowhere an unnamed woman appears, sharing her desperate need with Jesus. She



somehow knows of his power and ability to heal. He remains silent. The disciples urge him to send her away for her raucous shouting. Jesus responds that he has been sent to the lost sheep of Israel and to them alone. She shifts her posture, from shouting (and the word might be better translated, 'squawking' it's 'kratzo', onomatopoeia for the cry or shriek of a bird, the same word used when Peter was calling out while sinking in the sea, or when the crowds were calling for Jesus' death on Good Friday.) Instead of shouting, she prostrates herself before Jesus, bowing to him, catching his attention and

drawing him into one of the trickiest verbal exchanges of the entire Bible.

At her desperate plea for help, her humiliation continues. Jesus shows he's human. His response: "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," has been interpreted more ways than you could imagine. We'll never know what was encoded in these words.

Was it 'get lost, dog?' Was Jesus' 'compassion down', as some commentators have said, referring to this woman as a canine, albeit, perhaps, a small, harmless one? (With the footnote always that Jews never allowed dogs in homes, that was exclusively a Gentile/pagan practice...)

One new notion caught my eye this past week, that perhaps Jesus was tapping into the heritage of one of the lesser tribes of Israel, Caleb (which is Hebrew for dog.)

The Caleb was one of the unsung heroes of the Hebrews' time in the wilderness; the one who successfully made the case that if the Lord was by their side, they would be victorious in their quest for a place in Promised Land ahead of them. At the very least, there is some word play, some 'punning' going on, consistent with Jesus' other encounters throughout the gospels.

What is remarkable is that this woman's comeback out does Jesus. "Yes Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall under their masters' table." She is not put out by his put down, and she

picks up on this odd, veiled reference to this Hebrew tribe.

Appealing both to the need to eat and the awkwardness built into their circumstances- this dueling contrast of Jesus' distinguishing between children and yelping dogs, this woman appeals to the reality of the gift of leftovers for the hungry. Jesus is full of spirit and generosity, which means leftovers; sharing, and an opportunity for the overflow to extend beyond boundaries. She makes a case, not for selfishness, but for consistency in Jesus' ministry.

He has not been parsimonious, no matter what he says, and he never will be. His harsh words betray his truer, merciful nature.

Jesus pronounces this woman in the right: "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

Not only does Jesus change his mind, but he does so making a 180 degree turn. And it is a pagan woman who makes him do it. This story is a perfect snapshot of the two natures of our God in the flesh, Jesus. He's so human he can lose an argument. And he's divine enough to heal someone's daughter from miles away.



This Controversy Narrative comes out on the side of mercy.

On this communion Sunday, this story invites us into the conversation once again, to consider our own place in this story.

Today, this unnamed woman

overcomes the xenophobic, orthodox walls of religion that even Jesus once thought held firm. She shows that God's love in Christ knocks down walls, bridges barriers and allows us, even non-Jews, to receive love and mercy. We are all included by grace, where we don't belong by any merit of our own. You might feel like a dog's breakfast, but that's enough to unlock the heart of Jesus.

One of the great prayers in the Christian tradition is called the prayer of humble access. It comes from the Anglican Church, and it's not unfamiliar to us. Appropriate for the Lord's Supper, we are led to pray this way: "We do not presume to come to this Table, O Lord, trusting in our own goodness, but in your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your Table, but you are the Lord of mercy. Grant us then that we may eat with our gracious Lord Jesus, and to drink of his cup, that we may dwell in Christ, and Christ in us." That's the prayer that the Canaanite woman wrote, with her life. That's what she did.

Each one of us is invited to come to the table today with a prayer that we have written with our lives....

To be honest, I don't know what the prayer is that you bring with you. How could I? But I think that this unnamed Canaanite woman gives us a clue as to how we are to approach this table... She comes with a mix of ingredients- desperation, urgent faith, a deep, deep need for her daughter, ...and Jesus responds in mercy.

That Jesus responds in mercy to her, an outsider- is no longer a

point of controversy, but rather is the Gospel: the good news. It is the core of why we are here, enveloped in God's love. We who eat this bread together are bound so tightly that one of us can believe and another get the benefit—just as the woman believed and her daughter far away was healed.

So for our time together- before we come to the table, I invite you to consider, in our time of 'journaling with Jesus', how it is that you come this morning, what is on your heart, what weighs you down- where you need mercy for yourself, to be shared with others, in Jesus' name and Spirit...

Whatever it is you ask, with a humble heart, trusting in our Lord, know that you will hear Jesus say, woman, man, child, "great is your faith". Amen.