

Israel and there is enough for those who seemingly had never been included. By the way... that is us. Racially, ethnically, religiously, we have been included in God's plan through Jesus. We were on the outside looking in. We were once not a people, but now because of Jesus we are the people of God. WE have been included and the only reason we are included is mercy. God had mercy on us.

We have been included at the table of God. The question is who else do we need to make room for?

When I was growing up, most of the time we sat around a table in our small kitchen/dining room that had four chairs. My mom, dad, brother and I sat at that table and ate our meals. That is who you would find there. Family, people who looked like me, acted like me and thought like me. We were family and we had everything in common.

However, every now and then we would have more family over. On that day we would put another leaf in the table. We would make some more room. We would go and get the other chairs from the garage and make room for some friends and family. However, even then the people were not that diverse. They were like us, shared a lot in common with us. We only had two leafs for our dining table so it could only be so big.

So it is with most of us. We feel the most comfortable with those who we share the most in common. That is where we like to be. Every now and then we will expand a little and put a leaf in the table and invite some others into our lives. However, lets admit they look like us, think like us, and probably are not a stranger.

This story might simply be about placing another leaf in the table. Making a place for those who others and we ignore. Making a place for someone who really does not have much in common with us. In fact, the only thing they have in common is they like us, simply live in need of God's mercy. That's it. That is the basic common denominator with us and everyone else. Maybe when we remember that we have been recipients of God's mercy and everyone is in need of God's mercy that will be enough for us.... to put another leaf in the table.



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# Another Leaf in the Table

Matthew 15:21-28

TRINITY PULPIT



ur text today may be one of the most difficult texts for us to read and interpret, when it comes to the words of Jesus. No matter how we try to clean it up, dig deeper in to the meaning of words, or seek to reflect on Jesus' intent we still struggle with this text. It challenges not only our own prejudices, but also is a challenge to what we expect from Jesus himself. This is one of those Bible stories that we really need to be careful and read and say "that is what the Bible says" not "this is what I think it says" or "what we wished it said."

Jesus has crossed the Sea of Galilee and had landed in Geneseret and there people recognized him and brought him their sick and hurting and Jesus had healed them. Chapter 15 begins with a reference to Pharisees traveling from Jerusalem to that region and engaging Jesus in conversations about Jewish tradition. In particular, there is a conversation about a tradition of ritual washing hands before eating. Jesus reminds them that it is not what goes into the body that makes one unclean spiritually, but that which comes from the heart. "Thoughts of murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony and slander. These are what makes one unclean."

After this encounter with the Pharisees where Jesus appears to be tearing down traditional thinking and practice, He goes to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Now this is an important point. First of all, the word for withdrew is a word of retreat from battle. It could be that Jesus was retreating from this encounter with the Pharisees. The word does not seem to indicate that Jesus was on a mission to Tyre and Sidon and much as going there with some since of avoidance. Hershel Hobbs has suggested that Jesus was going there to teach the 12. He needed to get away from the crowds and He needed to get away from the Pharisees and going to Phoenicia into a Gentile unclean place was just the place to go to have some time with the 12 disciples.

When they arrived there we are told a Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to Jesus crying out Lord Son of David have mercy on me. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.

There are some incredible terms used to describe the woman by Matthew that put her squarely outside looking in when it came to those would be considered the people of God. Of course she lived in a place that was considered unclean and foreign. She was not of Galilee or Judea. She was from a place considered unclean. She is described as a person who was not ethnically a Jewish person.

Mark calls her a Greek or a Gentile but Matthew goes further to describe her as someone who was Canaanite. She was Cannanitish. The Canaanites were not like the Samaritans who were mixed in their ancestry. They were not really even like other Gentiles like the Romans or others. Matthew uses this word to stress the very hostility that existed between the Jewish people and those of this region.

This woman is not merely from the wrong place she is of the wrong people. She is a descendent from those of Canaan who were there before the Jewish people ever entered into the land of promise. She is from the very ones who had always been the enemies of God's people. She was from the people that God had stated clearly that God's people should stay separated from and much of the laws that Jesus had been challenging were created to separate God's people from the people who inhabited the land in the first place... the Canaanites.

The hostility that existed was not something that happened in the last few years like the Roman occupation, this had existed for centuries. This type of hatred had been passed down from one generation to the next and it was deep. We might even say natural at this point. It was just a given that if you were from these two ethnicities that

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you did not associate with each other, trust each other or interact.

Yet, there just like the Samaritan woman at the well, here is Jesus with an encounter with a woman who should have never really had an encounter with a Jewish man, let alone a Jewish teacher. Matthew uses a term here that is not translated in the NIV, but in the KJV that is behold or look. It is a term that we might say, “look” or “take notice.” Look, a Canaanite woman came to Jesus and cried out. .

Let’s look at the woman just a little closer. She is of course a Canaanite and she also has a daughter demon possessed. Now many might read that phrase and say “that sounds about right, or even maybe more cruel “serves her right” or even good. If you have an enemy that you think is not included in God’s love or care, then learning they are having a hardship is just more proof that you are right and they are wrong. In addition, the demon possession of the daughter would have been understood as judgment for the sin of the woman and her family. Remember, the disciples once asked about a blind man and stated the common understanding “is this man blind because of his sins or his parent’s sins?” Jesus of course debunked that whole notion by saying neither.

How can we describe this woman? We might also describe this woman as desperate. She has come to a Jewish Rabbi she calls Him Lord and Son of David. What she knows about Jesus we do not know. The term Lord may have just been a term of respect, but she does know enough to know that He is a Jewish man and He is Son of David. Have mercy on me.

What is Jesus first response? Silence. Does Jesus hear her? He has to hear her because the disciples hear her. In fact, they hear her way too much. The term that is used in the verse “did not answer a word” is one of emphatic ignoring. In the Greek language, the most important words in a sentence are at the beginning of the sentence and here the word is “NOT.” It is an emphatic “not.” He did not answer her a word. He did not give her the time of day. He did not recognize that she is there or even exists.

Is there anything more hurtful than just being ignored? No one wants to be ignored and yet, here in this story, a woman with a sick and tormented child crying out to Jesus is at first ignored. If we want a modern picture of this, it would be a politician who gives a statement and then just turns and walks out of the room while everyone is yelling questions. It is the way we do not look up or look someone in the eye who is at a corner begging for

money or food. No eye contact and we don’t have to deal with all the guilt and the “what should I do.” Just ignore. It is the way we might walk through town with someone asking something of us or trying to sell us something and we just don’t miss a beat in our step, we don’t look their way, we don’t answer them a word.

However, her being ignored does not keep her from yelling out. The term is that she keeps crying out. She keeps over and over again “Lord had mercy on me.” Over and over again. Maybe she gets louder instead of quieter. When you are in pain you cry out and when you are a parent with a child who is hurting you will do about anything to get them help. Forget being nice, forget being proper, and forget what is acceptable. My child is hurting... I am going to cry out. She keeps crying out and Jesus answers her not.

However, the disciples can’t take it. They come to Jesus and say send her away. In other words, speak Jesus and get this over with. It is interesting that literally what the text says is that the woman kept yelling and the disciples kept urging. The more the woman cried out the more the disciples asked Jesus to respond. Send her away.

Jesus does respond but not to the woman but the disciples. I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. Does Jesus mean that? Why does Jesus respond this way? He does not tell her that He was sent only to the sheep of Israel and she is outside looking in. He tells his disciples that He is sent only to Israel and implies that the woman who is calling out should just be ignored.

It is at this point that the woman stops her crying out and boldly comes to Jesus. She comes to Him and knelt before Him and said Lord help me. Now the scene has changed. The woman who was very formal, Lord Son of David has more of a desperate and informal tone. Lord help me. The NIV says she knelt but the word really is kept on bowing. She is completely humble and she is completely desperate and she has nothing to offer, no reason for Jesus’ help, no reason for healing for her daughter. If it happens it will be mercy. Simple and yet gracious marvelous mercy.

Jesus next response is the one that causes us such discomfort. Jesus response to this hurting and desperate woman is “it is not right to take what belongs to the children and give it to their dogs.” So what does Jesus say in this phrase. Many have tried to say that this is not as harsh as it sounds. Jesus uses a term for small puppy thus lovable type of animal. However, we must place this in some type of setting. Jewish people called gentile people dogs. This was not a term of endearment but a slur. They were seen as less than human. They were seen as a

nuisance. They were seen as those who roamed around to take what did not belong to them. If you were to call a person a dog, then you know exactly the word and the connotation here. Some have said that Jesus did not call the woman a dog, but was referring to her daughter. You don’t take from the children... God’s children and give it to the puppies the children of gentiles. That is not any better.

There is no good way to look at this. It is there. It is there for us to struggle with and reflect on. Why did Jesus say it? How could he say it? Jesus has ignored this woman and now it seems has insulted her. It seems so out of character for Jesus to react in this way. The same one who had compassion on 5000 plus now seems not able to have compassion on this poor pitiful one.

The woman’s response is masterful. Yes she says, almost acknowledging that this is how people think, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table. She is not asking to be fed what does not belong to her. She is almost acknowledging that her people have been seen as those outside, but she would be satisfied with that which was left over. If there is anything left over... that will be enough.

Jesus’ response is “Woman you have great faith.” There is a sense of astonishment in Jesus’ response. Much like his response to the Centurion’s faith in Chapter 8. The result is the woman who had nothing to claim but God is merciful, receives that mercy and her daughter is healed.

So, how are we to read this story? What are we to make of Jesus’ response? Some want this story to be about overcoming God’s reluctance to bless us. There are those who would say this is a story about us being persistent and breaking God down so that God will bless us. Jesus, in several instances, reminds us that this is not the character of God. Jesus would say who of you being evil would give your child a snake when they asked for food. How much more will God give freely to those who God loves. Or Jesus tells us a story of the Judge with the persistent woman, but that story is not to tell us that God is like that Judge. It tells us that God is not like that judge having to be convinced to be good to us. This is not about God’s reluctance and our persistence.

Should we read this as Jesus being sarcastic? Maybe we just don’t understand the nature of Jesus’ words. It is true that we do not know the tone of Jesus’ words. How He makes some of these statements can change the nature of this story. Sarcasm is a way we can say something that is obvious, but invites a further conversation and

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discussion. Sometimes when we kid with one another about where we are from or certain stereotypes of one’s ethnicity, vocation or hometown or school they went too we will make comments that seem hurtful on the surface, but we might use a sarcastic tone of voice and in that sarcasm it is obvious that we do not believe what we are saying. It is a response that is meant to be taken as sarcasm and one that invites a smile an actually invites the person into a further conversation. I have always wondered what was Jesus’ tone of voice in this conversation with His disciples and the woman. Was it sarcastic? Was it playful? Was it meant to be understood in this way?

A third way to look at it and has become a more popular interpretation in recent years is to see this as a turning point in Matthew’s gospel. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus does send the 12 to the lost sheep of Israel and not to the other territories when He sends them out. With the exception of the faith of the Centurion, there is very little expansion of God’s mission outside people of Israel to this point in Matthew’ gospel. In fact, later in this chapter at the feeding of the 4,000 there is an inclusion that the people praised the God of Israel. Some have suggested that those fed that day were outsiders and now Jesus’ ministry was expanding and thus, they praised God...God of Israel. This was a new moment of praise.

Those who take this interpretation would suggest that Jesus is fully human, as well as divine, finds Himself in a place he had not been before. Jesus is totally in an unclean place with outsider people and it is at this point that Jesus’ ministry expands beyond the lost sheep of Israel.

A final interpretation that is also honest with the text is to suggest that Jesus is role-playing to teach His disciples. Hershel Hobbs puts forth this idea. He believes Jesus took the 12 away to teach them and this became a moment for instruction. He suggests that the best way to reveal the harshness of racism and ignoring others is to give them a living example. As Jesus, who has shown compassion, in so many other moments seems to show none. It becomes very clear to the disciples just how ugly and horrible it can be to ignore others when it comes to the love of God.

All of these are honest interpretations of this difficult text and they do not dismiss the words or what the Bible says. No matter what we might think of the interpretations, here is what they all reveal... there is room at the table... God’s table for all who will come. There is not only enough... as we have seen with feeding of the 5,000 but more than enough. There is enough for the lost sheep of