

Honorary Jews

Matthew 15:21-28

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 14, 2011, by the Rev. Dr. Jason Byassee

If you read the gospels for any length of time you start to notice a pattern. Jesus is confronted by someone's dire need—illness, demon possession, hunger. But the religious authorities forbid mercy on that occasion—it's the Sabbath, or the person is unclean. Jesus argues with them—what's more important, this person's need, or our laws? The answer is clear, the person is healed, fed, or exorcised, Jesus is vindicated, his enemies fume, and the temperature is turned up on the way to the boiling point of his crucifixion. Scholars call these "controversy narratives." And that's why scholars make the big bucks.

But if you notice in this story we have a controversy narrative in reverse. Here Jesus is the Pharisee and the unnamed Canaanite woman wins the debate about mercy and wins mercy itself. The Canaanite woman presents her dire need, shouting at Jesus. He ignores her. The disciples suggest he send her away. He explains he's been sent only to the lost sheep of Israel, not to the gentiles. She changes strategies from the shouting and quietly kneels and begs, "Lord, have mercy." He responds with the harshest words he says to any supplicant in the gospels: "It is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The Canaanite woman responds with total agreement, "Yes Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall under their masters' table." Jesus knows that he's been bested, and pronounces her the winner: "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." Here Jesus is the religious establishment, the bad guy, saying why mercy cannot be extended. The Canaanite woman, the non-Jew, engages him in a battle of wits and succeeds. Everyone is amazed at her wisdom and faith, and she gains what she sought. Peter Hawkins of Boston University describes the story well—"Not only does Jesus change his mind, but he does so in a breathtaking 180 degree turn. Most astonishing of all it is a pagan woman who makes him do it." This story is a perfect snapshot of the two natures of our infleshed God, Jesus. He's so human he can lose an argument. And he's so divine enough to heal someone's daughter from miles away.

It's an honor to stand in this pulpit again and preach in Duke Chapel. I'm grateful some of my family is here and so is the choir from my new church, Boone United Methodist, from another university town, this one in the High Country of the North Carolina mountains. The good people of Appalachian State University send their greetings and ask me to remind you their invitation to play them in football still stands anytime, anywhere. Just can't get Duke to take that phone call. It's a festive occasion. And then Jesus goes and ruins it by calling a woman a dog. You can't take Jesus anywhere.

You can understand then why pastors like me have long tried to soften Jesus' words, to do what Will Willimon calls "protecting people from Jesus." Maybe he didn't really mean it. We're nice, enlightened, socially proper people and we'd never call someone else a dog. Jesus is at least as nice as we are, right? So, some point out, the Greek word dog here is in the diminutive. Look, he calls her a little dog, a puppy, it's almost cute, isn't it? The popular biblical scholar William Barclay suggested that whatever his words, the smile on Jesus' face and the compassion in his eye would have softened the blow. Maybe he winked at her as he said it, signaling an inside joke. The problem is none of those apologies for Jesus work in the slightest. There is no sign in the text that Jesus is friendlier than his words sound. In our day we think of dogs as cute, and it's still an insult to call someone a dog. In Jesus' day dogs were scavengers who eat dead things and trash and spread disease. They didn't have dog shows in the ancient world, high society ladies didn't carry poodles in purses. If you really want to insult someone in the bible you say the dogs will lick their blood. Sharon Ringe, a feminist biblical scholar who works to see stories from the vantage of nameless women, puts it nicely: here Jesus is caught with his compassion down.

This story, as with all stories in the bible, is primarily about God. It may be obvious to say that a biblical story is about God, but who God is, is not at all obvious. God is one who chooses. To put a sharper point on it, God takes sides, plays favorites. We don't know why God chooses the way God chooses, but we do know God has something of a preference for the unlikely. God chooses a 90 year old, Abraham, and says he'll give him more descendents than there are stars in the sky. God chooses not the firstborn Esau for blessing but the younger, Jacob, who happens to be a scoundrel. In our Old Testament reading for today God chooses Joseph, the snotty youngest brother, and makes him ruler Egypt to save his murderous 11 brothers from famine. When God has to take sides between mighty empire Egypt and lowly slaves Israel he picks the underdog—and chooses a stammerer, Moses, to preach and lead. And God chooses not the strapping rudy handsome sons of Jesse, but the youngest stick figured weakling to take on Goliath and be king, David. Kenda Creasy Dean of Princeton Seminary puts it this way: God has a preference for the unlikely. Israel, no one else.

It's a strange God we're dealing with here. Most people think of God as a semi senile grandfather, not unlike Santa Claus, who really should be giving good things to good people and hurting bad people. This is why the slew of recent atheist books have sold so well—point out that bad people prosper and it seems you've polished this god off. But the biblical God is much more interesting than that. He's a three personed communion of love, Father Son and Spirit, whose eternal grace spills over and he creates a world for no reason other than his sheer delight. Then of all the peoples in that world God chooses one, Israel, to be his

cherished people. He guides them, blesses them in battle against their enemies, gives them the law as grace to shape their lives, and promises to bless the whole world through them. Why does God do all this? We have no idea. Any reason is hidden in God's mysterious and loving heart. Willie Jennings here at Duke Divinity School calls God the "undomesticated God of Israel"—nice turn of phrase on the dog passage here in Matthew. God is wild and free and chooses whom he wills for reasons never clear to us. We can notice after the fact that the choice is beautiful. Walker Percy, the great 20th century Catholic novelist, praises God's election of the Jews this way: "Where are the Hittites? Why does no one find it remarkable that in most world cities today there are Jews but not one single Hittite, even though the Hittites had a great flourishing civilization while the Jews nearby were a weak and obscure people. When one meets a Jew in New York or New Orleans or Paris or Melbourne, it is remarkable that no one considers the event remarkable. What are they doing here? But it is even more remarkable to wonder, if there are Jews here, why are there not Hittites here? Where are the Hittites? Show me one Hittite in New York City."

Part of God's choosing one people, of course, is that God does not choose the others. And this Canaanite woman belongs to all the others. So do we, of course, though it's hard to remember. When we hear scripture we immediately identify with Jesus, with the disciples, with the good guys, but really we're not in the story at all. This is not our book, it's Israel's; and the God of Israel is not our God. You and I are goyim, gentiles. This is odd, I realize. If we're asked our race on an official form I doubt anyone in this room goes looking for the box that says "gentile."

Jesus says here, plain as day, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." I don't have a high view of historians who pick through Jesus' sayings to rule on what's historically reliable and what's not—good historians are more skeptical about their own judgments than that—but even those who do such work will tell you you can take this saying of Jesus to the bank. Jesus was sent only to God's people Israel. In fact, Jesus is God's people Israel. As Israel he was tempted in the wilderness. As Israel Jesus called twelve people. As Israel he taught the law to everyone. As Israel he fed the people miraculously from heaven. And as Israel, well, what's he do with this Canaanite? Now those who've read much of the Old Testament will know that often the only good Canaanite is a dead Canaanite. They're the people with the misfortune of living in the promised land when God's people move in. So the book of Joshua tells story after story of their conquest. The Canaanites worshipped their own gods, so Israel was not to intermarry with them (interesting how Israel is always either fighting with or marrying its enemies—human nature in a nutshell). Israel calls the goyim "dogs" for a reason—to remember to avoid them, don't marry them, don't worship their gods, don't even talk with them. The name Jesus is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua. What will this new Joshua do with this desperate Canaanite?

Shift vantages with me if you will to this woman. She's not who should be approaching Jesus. But she has a sick child, and she's desperate, and a miracle worker is nearby. She shouts after him. Notice her boldness—this is not a polite, discrete approach. But as the feminist bumper sticker says, well behaved women rarely change history. Notice too this mom addresses Jesus the right way, the way most of Israel refuses to address him: as Son of David. Son of the king who conquered my people repeatedly, have mercy. Is there any sweeter word in the English language than "mercy"? Most of our religious language is worn, threadbare, as Walker Percy says our words are rubbed down "smooth as poker chips," but somehow not the word "mercy." Jesus first ignores her, hears the disciples say to send her away, Jesus rebuffs her, and then he harshly rebukes her with the dog comment. Martin Luther wrote perhaps the greatest sermon on this passage in church history. He describes the encounter this way: "This is a very hard rebuff, when God conceals his grace so high and deep."

Jesus is not nearly as nice as we would have been, is he? As a pastor I'm part of a movement, the Christian Church, that is constantly desperate for new people. I put on every ounce of charm I have when someone new comes to our church. They may not like Jesus, but boy I'm going to make sure they like me. As the church in North America we have done everything we can to lower the bar to try and lure people in. I remember a newspaper review of Willow Creek, the megachurch outside Chicago, where the reviewer said, hey, I don't believe in God, but why wouldn't you want to come to Willow Creek on Sundays? The coffee's good, the people are nice, the chairs are comfortable, the music is excellent, the show is good. It's not like there's something better to do in Chicago on Sunday morning! To their great credit Willow realized recently they were wrong—they should have asked much more of people and not pretended discipleship was so easy. Jesus here reminds me of rabbis who when a gentile asks to convert to Judaism are supposed to say no, not once, not twice, but more than that. If you keep coming back maybe you're serious. But Jesus is more harsh in this story than rabbis of his time or ours—they would have noticed this woman was interested in Judaism, and helped her convert. Jesus just turns her away. One Jewish scholar says of this passage that Jesus is so harsh here if any other Jewish teacher of his era had said this, Christianity never would have forgiven Judaism for it. Ouch. Elsewhere in scripture Jesus makes prayer sound so easy! Just ask, you'll move mountains! I'll give you whatever you ask for! It only takes two or three people praying! And here he says, essentially, get lost dog.

Why?

Luther, writing in 1522, suggests this. Jesus says a very clear no to this woman. He turns her away. But Luther says there is a yes hidden in the no. And this woman is determined to find that yes. So she persists in her approach to Jesus, after one snub, silence, after another, the disciples' put down, after another, I'm not sent for you, after the worst, you're a dog. And she says yes Lord, even

the dogs get to eat the crumbs under the table. This is all written, Luther says, “so that we may know how deeply God conceals his grace before our face.” Things as brutal as Jesus’ response to this woman will happen in our lives too. God will respond to us with silence, even rebuke, when we approach. Persevere. Be like this woman. This woman approaches Jesus the way Israel is meant to approach God. Israel has a long history of bold approach to God. Abraham argued with God—hey, if there are 5 righteous people in Sodom, don’t kill them, ok? Jacob refused to let God out of a headlock without a blessing. Moses refused to let God destroy the people for idolatry while God was delivering the ten commandments. And now, most surprising of all, a Canaanite woman approaches God the right way, with boldness, kneeling, humbly submitting to his words, and then refusing to let God off the hook. Luther writes that “She catches Christ with his own words. He compares her to a dog, she concedes it, and asks nothing more than that he let her be a dog. Where will Christ now take refuge?” O woman, great is your faith, Jesus says, your daughter is healed.

Friends you and I are like this woman. Israel’s God is not our God. The bible is not our book. Jesus is not our savior (did I just say that in church?) All these good gifts are for Israel. And yet—what does her comment about crumbs under the table call to mind? Here in Matthew, Jesus has just fed 5000 with baskets full leftover. In another chapter soon he’ll feed 4000 with more baskets full leftover. Are you seeing the point? Israel is fed in full. And then there are gobs of leftovers for us, who are not God’s people. Krister Stendahl famously described the baptized as honorary Jews. We are those who overhear the gospel. Hey wait, the son of David is addressing David’s people. We want to hear this. Maybe there’s enough bread for us too. Willie Jennings says of this woman that she is right not to pretend to be Israel, she is not Israel. “But even those outside may benefit from God’s gifts to Israel.” That’s us, included by grace, where we don’t belong.

One of the great prayers in the Christian tradition is called the prayer of humble access, it comes from the Anglican Church and has been dear also to us Methodists. When it’s time to come up for the Lord’s Supper we’re encouraged to pray this way. “We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table, but thou art the same Lord whose property it is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore gracious Lord so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.” Amen. That’s a prayer that the Canaanite woman writes with her life.

For those who pray this sort of prayer there is a catch. There’s always a catch, isn’t there? The one true God of Israel has invited us to eat the crumbs that fall from his children’s table. And we have to do so with all others who approach his table seeking these crumbs. Some will look like us. Most won’t. There will be people of all races, nations, ages, times and places. There will be people who like processions and organs and gothic cathedrals. There will be people who like guitars and dancing and hand raising and miracle performing. There will be Christians from places where the church is growing like gangbusters—like Cote d’Ivoire and Sudan and South Korea. And from places where they haven’t made a new disciple in ages. The decision to follow will affect all the areas in which Israel defended itself from the Canaanites: who we marry, who we eat with, who we fight (now, no one), who we worship. Everything is changed now with Jesus coming. We who eat this bread together are bound so tightly that one of us can believe and another get the benefit—the woman believes and her daughter far away is healed. The church is a new social reality that never existed before, and maybe doesn’t exist in full now. To belong all you have to do is not belong. To recognize that we have no merit, no justification, there’s no price we can pay to eat beneath this table. The only question that matters is whether we want mercy from Jesus. He doesn’t care about your resume, though many in here have long ones. All he cares about is whether you will boldly and humbly kneel, eat, and believe, and then if you’ll belong to all others who kneel, eat, and believe. I understand if you don’t want to. Who wants to submit to being called a dog? But if you want mercy from Jesus, hang on. People you love will be healed. Others you love will be enraged. And you will hear Jesus say, woman, man, great is your faith. Amen.