

Changing Traditions, Changing Minds: Message for Sunday August 20th, 2017 *Based on Matt 15: 10-28*

This is a most interesting scripture reading from Matthew—very earthy writing, don't you think, Jesus talking about bodily functions and sewers, ignoring a woman's request for mercy, and calling a whole ethnic group of people dogs! Not the sort of thing one expects when hearing the bible read in church, is it?

Also interesting that Matthew paired these 2 stories together. In the first story, Jesus is berating the way some of the people of Israel interpret the law of Moses. Jewish "dietary laws placed a high premium on the purity of the individual, and ... Jesus is turning expectations on their head. While most of the religious community was preoccupied with what would defile and hurt the body, Jesus was more concerned with what come out of our bodies that can defile and hurt the world."¹ He even used a parable to explain it, but that didn't help much, so he got very graphic in his explanation. Adhering to all the dietary purity laws in the world do not make for a pure person, essentially saying that the traditions to which they fastidiously adhered to make them right with God really wasn't cutting it. What is in our hearts is what really dictates who we are, what kind of person we are, and that's what should guide our behaviours! Their focus was on the wrong things. It was as though Jesus was tossing their traditions into the sewer! I'm sure this would not have endeared him to the traditionalists and purists among his own people.

In our second story for today, Matthew tells about Jesus' journey into the non-Jewish territory of Tyre and Sidon, an area we today call Lebanon. According to one sources I read, this is of significant interest because it's the only time that Jesus was ever outside of Palestine and outside of Jewish territory.² But even in alien territory, Jesus' reputation has preceded him, and he is confronted by a Canaanite woman to perform a healing, the woman's daughter is ill.

Now, good and decent women in Jesus' time—even Canaanite women -- did not come up to unfamiliar men in public and demand their attention as this woman did—and they most certainly did not accost strangers on the street shouting at them with personal information! Highly improper, almost scandalous, this public display—she probably put herself at some personal and maybe even lawful risk to do so!

And in return, good and decent men, especially Jewish men--did not have public conversations with unfamiliar women, and especially not Gentiles—non Jewish women. There was a clear delineation, clear boundaries and defined laws about appropriate behavior between the genders in a public space.

I wonder if Jesus was thinking about this when he didn't respond to her demands at first, I wonder if he was a bit taken aback, or maybe simply chose to ignore this most unusual, untoward public display, not to make it worse than it already was. But the Canaanite woman keeps shouting, "Lord, Son of David have mercy on me, help my daughter". She knew who Jesus was, she's addressing him as son of David, thus acknowledging that she knows who he is within the Jewish context. She knows of him, knows he can heal her daughter. She is not letting go of this opportunity. Imagine her distress, her love and concern for her daughter, to embarrass herself in public in this manner—a Canaanite woman, begging a Jewish Rabbi Healer; and how firm her belief that Jesus can do this healing. This is one strong and determined woman!

The disciples are mortified at this public spectacle, and tell Jesus to send her away. But Jesus doesn't respond to that request, he doesn't say to try and quiet the woman or get rid of her; he seems to ignore his disciples' suggestions. So Jesus addresses her directly, telling her he was sent only to minister to the lost people of Israel, certainly not an especially politically correct thing to say, you'd think, considering he was in foreign territory. Kind of like saying that she wasn't good enough for Jesus to tend to. The woman is not to be deterred, and further demeans herself in public,

¹ Dock Hollingsworth in "Homelitical Perspective" for Matt 15: 10-28 in Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol 3.

² Wm. Barclay-Diocese of Brandon website from 2011

kneeling before him... on the street and says “Lord help me.” (v. 25) And Jesus says to her, even more un-Jesus-like it seems: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Ok, this most definitely could be construed as a racial slur -- kind of shocking to hear that from Jesus! And to call her a dog, wow—even if there was long standing animosity between the Canaanites and the Jews. Now in fairness, the word that is translated in English to ‘dog’, *kunaria* in Greek, is better translated to something like puppy, as in a little household pet type of dog, not the feral, wild dog of the street.³ But still.....

Well, our determined Gentile mother is not to be put off, she’s come this far in her mission to get Jesus to heal her daughter, she has his attention now, she’s so close... she’s risked much to get this far. So she takes another risk and responds back, **she boldly challenges Jesus**, using his own argument to make the point and nails it! Yes Lord, she says, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table. Well, to quote Sheldon Cooper from the TV show “Big Bang Theory”, that’s a ‘Ba-zinga!’

Smart woman, brilliant reply: In this one sentence, she acknowledges Jesus as Lord and master, realizing and accepting that Jesus was called to minister to his own people, but her response hits the nail on the head: Yes, but are Gentiles not people too? Are we too not children of God? Even if she and her daughter are not God’s chosen people, this woman knew who Jesus was, she was absolutely convinced -- or desperate enough to believe, to hope, that Jesus’ powers and abilities could not, would not be limited by political, racial, gender or religious differences and boundaries.

I wonder if this woman’s challenge gave Jesus pause, challenging his traditional thinking; the traditions with which he would have been raised; centuries long traditional animosity between Jews and Canaanites! It does seem as though her argument actually causes Jesus to change his mind, doesn’t it?

One writer I read put it this way:

“Some recent commentators see this as a moment where Jesus is ‘caught with his compassion down’ and forced to confront his own prejudice; in a reversal of the usual roles, the respected teacher learns from an outsider ‘the need to broaden his ministry of hospitality to those outside the house of Israel.’ ”⁴

Another commentator I follow put it like this:

And through her person and her plea, (the Canaanite woman) teaches Jesus something about himself and his mission that is crucial for him to learn. I realize that we may feel uncomfortable with the idea of Jesus “learning,” but I can’t think of another term that better captures Jesus’ expanded sense of mission at this point in the Gospel of Matthew, the gospel that ends with the commission to take the good news to the very ends of the earth.

And you know what I also find remarkable, Jesus doesn’t berate her, Jesus doesn’t call her out on her socially inappropriate behaviours, and you’d think he would be well justified to do so, wouldn’t you! But, he sees the truth in her statement, her understanding of the bigger picture, sees the truth in what she has said, and recognizes her great faith, and tells her: “Let it be done for you as you wish.” And the gospel writer tells us that her daughter was healed instantly.’

³ Barclay, *ibid*

⁴ Iwan Russell-Jones in *Theological Commentary for Proper ‘15’* (Sunday between Aug 14 & 20) in *Feasting on the Word* Year A Vol. 3 p. 360

What a remarkable pairing of radical and shocking stories Matthew is giving us today. First Jesus challenges the Pharisees to re-look at those traditions that are not longer really meaningful, that are no longer useful, but are even dangerous and hurtful. They do not truly touch our hearts or change our way of being. Adhering to tradition for the sake of tradition can easily lead to a false sense of being right with God, because we're doing it the traditional way, the way we're sure is the 'right' way.

And then Jesus himself is publically challenged to look at his own traditional thinking, his exclusionary thinking, by a foreign woman and in a foreign land. Why would Jesus seem to be so callous, so un-Jesus like—ignoring a desperate call for help, then refusing to help a sick child, and calling the woman a dog—not just the woman but inferring the same to her whole nationality! This doesn't seem like the same person who told the children to come to him, who healed the child of the centurion, a Greek centurion; the same man who asked for a cup of water from a Samaritan woman at a well, who wasn't afraid to challenge the Pharisees, the keepers of Jewish law, who told the story of the good Samaritan. It is difficult for us to think that Jesus Christ had to be taught to be more open minded, to challenge the traditions that he was taught, that he held dear. But challenged he was, and indeed he listened, he learned, he changed his mind. In a time when racism is once again raising its ugly head, this is a necessary reminder for all to hear and live by, and maybe that we even need to challenge our way of thinking about others. Because we are all God's sons and daughters, and the Gospel is for all nations.

Holding to tradition just for the sake of tradition can become a barrier between us and God, it can actually get in the way of being truly Christ-like. What if Jesus had not stopped and listened to the woman, considered her point of view, and realized that she had a very valid point? The child would have continued to suffer!

Who among us hasn't cried out to Jesus: "Lord have mercy"—either for ourselves or for one we love. Who among us hasn't felt worthy of Jesus' love and forgiveness, felt like we are not are deserving of Christ's mercy, of God's love, of the Spirit's healing touch. If we are honest, I suspect many of us feel undeserving of God's love. Our stories today tell us that God's love is for all! And that when we do cry out to Jesus for mercy, Jesus doesn't criticize or berate us for coming to him for help. He stops, listens and hears our requests. Whatever the reason, whatever our sin, whatever our pain, whatever our need, we are listened to, loved and forgiven, by a merciful and caring God.

We will not be turned away.

And all of God's people say... Amen.