

WPC
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August 14, 2011

Crumbs From The Master's Table
Mark 7:24-30; Matthew 15:21-28

When we think of Jesus, we tend to think of someone who is kind, gentle, and loving, someone who always stands up for the suffering and oppressed. Think about Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4, where Jesus treats this outcast woman respectfully and generously, to the great surprise of his disciples. He makes clear that the "living water" he offers is for all people, Jew and Samaritan, male and female alike. It's easy to be fond of this portrayal of Jesus.

But the Jesus in our two passages here from Mark and Matthew is admittedly harder to like. I remember reading an article a few years ago where Louisville Seminary Professor Amy Plantinga Pauw's Sunday school class once referred to this passage as a "mean Jesus" story. His response appears to be exceedingly harsh and insensitive and very un-Jesus like. It's a challenging passage because the way that Jesus responds seems so uncharacteristic of him. What's going on here?

As we take a closer look at this story, it's helpful to note that it appears in both Mark and Matthew's Gospels. But there are some fascinating differences in detail found in Matthew.

Both gospels indicate that prior to this incident, Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes had had a confrontation. Perhaps Jesus and his disciples are tired of and want to get away from these Pharisees and scribes, who at this time were constantly pursuing Jesus, trying to entrap him. So they head out from Galilee to the northern coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. Pastor Keith Potter believes Jesus and his disciples withdrew – he gets the sense they went away on a staff retreat.

Mark makes it clear that Jesus was not in this area for mission work: “He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there” (v.24). But a woman whose daughter has an unclean spirit hears about Jesus and comes to him, asking for help. In Mark’s Gospel, this woman is described simply as “a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin” (Mark 7:26), but Matthew ups the stakes by calling her “a Canaanite.”

The residents of Canaan are the people who were displaced when the people of Israel came into the land. So there was conflict in that day as well as today. The Canaanites had been spread out – some lived among the Israelites – and they were considered to be dogs by the people of Israel. The word “dog” in that part of the world was a very contemptuous insult – dogs were domesticated in those days, but not the way they are today. Dogs were

considered disgusting scavengers in the streets, living off garbage (William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, 9/10/06, p. 48).

So now we have a better sense of the context surrounding this drama. Jesus has withdrawn from an angry confrontation with officials of Israel, only to run into a woman who comes from Israel's ancient foe – Canaan. Now watch what happens:

First, the woman begs Jesus for mercy on behalf of her daughter. Mark, in his characteristic direct way, simply says, “she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.” Matthew, though, offers more details on what the woman actually says: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” Notice, she calls Jesus both “Lord” and “Son of David.” Thus, one of the main themes of the story is this woman's amazing faith. In contrast to the Pharisees and scribes who confront Jesus, this foreign woman from an enemy country recognizes that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of David, the Savior.

In Mark, Jesus immediately responds to the woman. But in Matthew, Jesus responds with silence. Why is Jesus silent? The most obvious answer is that he has compassion fatigue. Up to this point, there have been constant demands, the crowds have been pressing in, Jesus realizes that the time is approaching when he must go to Jerusalem, and here is one more person (a

foreigner, even!) demanding attention. Wasn't that one of the reasons they got out of Israel in the first place?

There's another possibility – this silence might be, a “profound silence as a precursor to a critical moment” (Pastor Keith Potter). There are in fact a number of moments in the Bible when Jesus is silent before acting: for example, he was silent with the crowd when they brought before him the woman caught in adultery; he was silent before King Herod; he was silent as he looked upon Peter after Peter had denied him 3 times. This was a very loud silence prior to Jesus giving a profound message.

After the disciples urge Jesus to get rid of this bothersome woman, we get the following saying by Jesus in Matthew, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” So now the woman is facing at least three obstacles: the silence of Jesus, the hostility of the disciples, and “a definition of the mission of the Messiah that apparently includes ‘the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ but not her and her daughter” (Tom Long, Matthew, 175).

At this point, most people would have given up in dismay. However, this is a woman of “great faith,” and she responds with reverence and worship. Matthew reports that the woman “knelt before” Jesus, which is the

same Greek word used to describe the magi kneeling before the baby Jesus. She then repeats her plea for help.

Jesus finally breaks his silence toward her, but his word comes across as a harsh rebuff: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” I’ve already mentioned the connotations associated with the word “dog.” The meaning is clear: The people of Israel are the “children,” Gentiles are “dogs,” and what Jesus has to give is intended for the “children.”

Amy Pauw believes that Jesus here “reaffirms the ethnic and religious boundaries of his ministry” (Amy Plantinga Pauw, Bible Explorations, April 2006). When a synagogue leader named Jairus asks Jesus to heal his daughter, Jesus goes out of his way to help (Mark 5:22-43). But when a Gentile woman comes with the same request, Jesus turns her away.

But instead of going away quietly, the woman talks back! “Sir, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” “Clearly surprised, Jesus commends her great faith and heals her daughter. Biblical scholar Judith Gundry-Volf notes that Jesus not only praises the Syrophenician woman, but is himself *inspired* by her faith. Her faith teaches Jesus something about the breadth of both his ministry and God’s mercy.” (Amy Plantinga Pauw, Bible Explorations, April 2006)

That's the opinion of a lot of people who read this passage, and I think it's a valid one. But I want to share with you another possible interpretation.

In the original Greek, when Jesus says, "It's not fair to take the children's food and toss it to the dogs," he uses the diminutive term for dog. The Greek word for dog is *kuon* – a harsh, insulting phrase meaning a scavenger. But here, Jesus uses the word *kunariois*, which means puppy or doggie. So that makes for a somewhat softer reading.

Now, you might laugh and say, "Wait a minute, it's still fairly insulting to be called a doggie." And that's true – the sting remains. Some people have also noted that Aramaic, which Jesus spoke with his disciples, doesn't contain such a diminutive, but in order for this Canaanite woman to understand Jesus, he would have had to speak Greek, which was the universal language of that time. Besides, Matthew decided to use the diminutive for some reason.

But there's one other clue in this passage that suggests that Jesus *might* not have been acting as harshly as it seems at first.

It's a small thing, and I don't want to place more weight on this than it deserves, but it's interesting that Matthew includes much more detail on this story than Mark. Matthew says that this woman is a Canaanite; he includes more of the conversation between the woman and Jesus; he notices how

much faith this woman has. However, Matthew omits a small detail that's included in Mark.

After the woman begs him to cast the demon out of her daughter, Mark states that Jesus *said to her*, "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Matthew, however, simply says, "Jesus answered." Maybe Matthew is trying to correct Mark's account. After all, Mark was Peter's disciple, so he got this story secondhand. Matthew, though, was one of the 12 Disciples, and he was present to witness this incident directly. According to Matthew, Jesus doesn't necessarily speak directly to the woman when giving his answer.

If he's not speaking to the woman, then who could he be directing his words to? I think it's *possible* that his target audience is his own disciples. Throughout the gospels, the disciples are portrayed as a bit slow to understand Jesus. Perhaps Jesus was using this time as a teaching moment, trying to show them that the gospel crosses boundaries and even reaches "the dogs." But he softens his message a bit by saying "doggies" or "puppies."

If that's the case, then Jesus has a bit of a twinkle in his eye when he responds to the woman, because he's teasing the disciples along. He wants them to know that the gospel even reaches people like this woman. He's

trying to draw his disciples to come to the truth of why he came – to show that his love is extended even to a Canaanite woman.

And this woman has the wit to match the wit of Jesus. She's able to give a good answer to what might have been a question to test the disciples: Lord, even the doggies eat the crumbs that fall from the Master's table. And it's clear that her response impresses and wins Jesus. He marvels at her faith and heals her daughter. Boundaries are broken down – between the old and the new, between male and female, between Jew and Gentile.

The U2 song we heard earlier, "Crumbs from your table," has a line that says: "Where you live should not decide whether you live or whether you die." That's the good news of this passage - Jesus' love is big enough to cross all boundaries and break down all barriers. Thanks be to God. Amen.