

Even Dogs

Even dogs...this is the part of the rebuke that the Canaanite woman said to Jesus that poses such a problem for us when we read this passage...which sounds such a jarring note in our understanding of the man Jesus who we just learned that while seeking solitude for himself holds such compassion in his heart for the crowds that have followed him spends the day healing them. Then as the day draws to a close provides for them by feeding them abundantly from scarce supplies available. This narrative follows closely another instruction given by Jesus which is more palatable for us at first might seem unrelated...the one about what things are clean and unclean...that passage titled "the things which defile" in our gospel readings today. Yet in some ways the situations are linked. It seems to be an innate characteristic of humans that we like to sort and label almost everything that into which we come into contact. The reading from Matthew actually begins with Jesus responding to a criticism that the Pharisees have made against him because of something his disciples have done: they have picked some heads of grain as they walked through a field and eaten them with "unclean hands". It seems the difference between physical cleanliness and ritual cleanliness has become blurred so that eating with dirty hands is now something that is religiously "unclean". Jesus is instructing his disciples and the crowds around him that this is not the case; that the things that go into your mouth are not what will make you unclean according to the ways of the Lord...Jesus tells them, "Listen and understand: It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." This teaching of Jesus also offended the Pharisees, but Jesus made it clear to his disciples that what defiles is what comes out. Jesus told his disciples: "But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles, for out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile." We know eating with dirty hands might make you physically ill, but it will not endanger your relationship with God...modern hygiene establishes the importance of hand washing...but it is not a religious concern. This teaching comes in the section which most translations describe as Jesus dealing with the traditions of the Elders; the things that have become religious traditions supported by the religious leaders but are not viewed as being ways of the kingdom by Jesus. Jesus' concern and emphasis is on how the citizens of the kingdom treat one another which is shown by what comes out of the person...not what has gone in. And then we come to this interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. On the surface this seems a different situation, but part of the issue here is there are underlying boundaries which are crossed. There is a great deal of information in the details that Matthew puts in these verses that we do not understand in the context of the original audience. The first is the simple geography where the encounter takes place. When Jesus leaves "that place" and goes away to the district of Tyre and Sidon, he has left the Galilee. Not only has he left Galilee but he has entered a non-Jewish region, a region

populated mainly by non-Israelites. So encounters here are going to be with people across those boundaries established by tradition. This woman is going to be a gentile, the most usual term for those not Jewish. Yet that is not the term used here. Matthew describes the woman Jesus meets using another term...in our reading she is called the Canaanite woman; in other translations she is referred to as the "Syro-Phoenician" woman. This marks her as obviously a foreigner. But the fact that these terms were used is important because the inhabitants of this region had probably not been known by these terms for centuries reveals some biases, especially as the Canaanites were ancient opponents of Israel; and reinforces how foreign she would have been to Jesus and his disciples. The same is true of the other description's history, used in Mark's gospel although it is less prejudicial. Yet this woman with this foreign background and appearance recognizes Jesus...truly recognizes him by the name that she uses to approach him: "Have mercy upon me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." In this passage we are not told that Jesus is being accompanied by great crowds; only the disciples. So we don't know how she knew that Jesus could offer her daughter healing; only that she knew that he could. And she approaches him using the right plea for mercy. She cried out loudly, seeking that mercy and healing for her child. Jesus' first response is no response at all. As a man of his time, men did not interact with women in public, even women of their own culture much less a foreign one, so his non-action is in keeping with custom...maybe not what we expect of the compassionate Jesus, but it is in keeping with those traditions of the elders that he has just been criticizing. His disciples come up and give him support, even encourage his non-response by urging him to send her away. Evidently, she is causing something of a commotion. They tell Jesus: "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." Jesus does not send her away. "He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'" This is a key point which is often debated in terms of what does it mean about Jesus' understanding of his role as Messiah and does it change because of this encounter. That is not precisely ever addressed, nor can it be. But what happens in the story is that evidently she hears this and instead of leaving, she comes closer. "But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.'" And although the response that Jesus gives is not what we expect from him, he does something unexpected for his time and culture: he interacts with her—crossing that boundary of talking to someone not only not Jewish, but female. One commentary said he gives her the respect of a reason for his refusal. Considering his rudeness, perhaps "respect" is not actually involved, but nevertheless, Jesus does give her a reason for not responding positively to her plea. "He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'" Even these days when we love our pets, it is easy to understand that this was meant to be an insult. But she persisted even then. She knows she is seeking help from a longstanding foe whom she knows despises her because of national and racial divisions. Yet she is willing to be vulnerable, risking not only refusal but ridicule by seeking help. In this story, she has the best line: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." She is persistent in

the face of insults and rejection, for her daughter's sake. In this story we see a very human Jesus. We see ourselves mirrored in Jesus' attitude toward the Canaanite woman, definitely not our best self...and perhaps here we see the man Jesus with "a blind spot." Perhaps here, we see a place where even Jesus has allowed the traditions of the "elders" to blind him. Underlying the terminology of the name-calling used is a cultural difference. In Jewish households, dogs would not have been allowed inside the home much less under a table; they would not have been considered pets but were thought of as scavengers, as unclean...so the term used by Jesus was truly a vile insult. Yet among Greeks and other gentiles in the area where this exchange took place, dogs were allowed within household and often were fed under the tables while others were eating. Thus, the woman's reference that both the children and the dogs could be fed. Here what has come out of the mouth of the Canaanite woman is an example of a different cultural experience. It is also an example of faith that the food that is provided for Israel is plentiful enough to feed many more, and Jesus answers her: "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish" And her daughter was healed instantly." In Jesus' last statement to her she is no longer Canaanite, but a woman of great faith; there is no longer a boundary between her and the food available to the citizens of the kingdom. The passage from the book of Isaiah addresses another issue from Jewish tradition which will appear in the book of Acts as an encounter between an Ethiopian eunuch and the disciple Philip. Jewish tradition at the time of Jesus had barred eunuchs from the faith, yet this passage clearly indicates that God had not barred them from the kingdom. It seems that this reading is about how we label things differently than our Lord does; that our labels establish barriers and boundaries. We tend to label in an effort to separate and group so that the membership in the group becomes less diverse, becomes more and more uniform so that when observed...it looks like us. God on the other hand tends to just not see those differences or labels, to think they are meaningless and to instead look to see what comes from the heart of the person; to look and see how they treat those around them. When we consider the matter of what is "clean or unclean", whether we judge someone as "acceptable or not", we need to be careful to see if we have any possible "blind spots" which are marking those boundaries and making those judgments. As professor at Union, Carson Brisson often says when referring to citizenship in the kingdom, "those most home are those who are seeking those least home." Wasn't that what our Lord was often found doing? And isn't that the best example for us? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.