

Matthew 15:10-11, 17-28

The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

August 20, 2023

As Christians, we are called to be Christlike. So just like Christ, if you ask a minister a direct question, we'll probably dodge it.

For example, if you ask me, "Reverend, is the Bible really true? Like, historically?" I'll probably respond, "Well, believe what you like about what really happened; let's talk about what it means."

But if you insist, then if *anything* is historically true in the Bible, it's probably this passage from the Gospels. This story about a woman seeking help, who Jesus dismisses with a racial slur, is probably historical.

Why? Because a principle of textual criticism is that the more embarrassing a story is to the author, the less likely it is that the author simply invented it. Think about it: the purpose of the Gospel accounts is to demonstrate that Jesus was the Messiah. Nobody is going to *invent* a story; nobody is going to add a story to the Bible; that paints Jesus in a bad light.

But we might *exclude* such a story from the Bible. So why is it in there regardless? Someone in the early Christian community thought that this event was worth including. Someone found value in it.

So what value might that be?

As much as I'd like to, I can't find value in Jesus' insult. I can't explain it away. Some people suggest that Jesus is just testing the woman's faith, that he didn't really mean it. But I'm not sure that really makes it less offensive.

I think someone really *was* being tested in this passage, but it wasn't the Canaanite woman.

It was the disciples.

This strange, embarrassing story is still in the Bible because it tells us something about discipleship.

In the previous Chapter, Jesus hears that King Herod has murdered John the Baptist. So he goes off by himself to pray and to reflect. But the local people hear that he's nearby, and a huge crowd gathers. The disciples come to Jesus and say, "It's getting late and we're in the middle of the wilderness; you should send the crowds away to buy food." But Jesus responds, "No, you give them something to eat." The disciples object, "We have nothing but here but five loaves and two fish." In other words, "We don't have what it takes." Jesus responds by telling them to bring the food to him. He blesses the foods, breaks it, and has it distributed. The food is enough for more than five thousand people. The disciples have enough food. Jesus thinks it's enough. Jesus thinks they have what it takes. But the disciples don't have faith in the food or in themselves.

The next day, Jesus gets into an argument with the Scribes and Pharisees about food rituals. He says that what or how you eat does not make you unclean, but rather what you say and do.

Okay. Now here comes this Canaanite woman, a non-Jew, who in their eyes is unclean because she does not observe the proper food rituals. Like the hungry crowds, she has a need: healing for daughter. As with the hungry crowds, the disciples bring her need to Jesus – though in this case they’re motivated by irritation with the woman’s demands, rather than by compassion.

Jesus answers the disciples, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Jesus seems to be refusing to help the woman, but why is he saying this to the disciples? *They don’t want him to help her; they want him to send her away!*

At this point in the previous event – the feeding of the five thousand – Jesus was saying, “You give them something to eat.”

So I have to wonder...what if Jesus is getting out of the disciples’ way here?

When he says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” is he saying “*You* help her?”

If Jesus’ ministry is only to Israelites, what if the disciples are called to broaden that ministry?

After his argument with the scribes and Pharisees, immediately after making this statement about how your words and actions are what matters and not whether you follow the proper eating rituals, Jesus brings his disciples to Tyre and Sidon. The land of Gentiles – *where people do not follow the proper eating rituals*.

If this is a test, the disciples fail it. Just as with the feeding of the 5000, they cannot break past what they think they know about what they are able and permitted to do: about what Jesus may be *calling them* to do.

What have you been told about what you can do? What have you believed, about what you're permitted to do? And how has that held you back from what you could have done?

Maybe there's something about you – your race or your gender or your upbringing or your sexual orientation – that supposedly disqualifies you from following your dreams. Maybe people have told you that you're unclean.

Or maybe there's something you've done – maybe you have a criminal record. Maybe you made a bad choice on a bad day. Maybe it's a failure known only to yourself. And now you imagine that you dare not share the God-given beauty that dwells within you.

Maybe you're afraid to share the Gospel in word or in action.

Then maybe you're like this Canaanite woman.

I think Jesus genuinely had a bad day, or maybe he was genuinely a product of his culture, in the moment that he dismissed this Gentile woman.

It *was* a test, but not a deliberate test by Jesus. It was the kind of test that each of us faces every day: a test set by the circumstances of life. And she passed the test. She stepped up and claimed the promises of the Gospel for herself. She affirmed the Jewish Messiah as her Messiah, the son of David as her Lord, and herself as a sheep of the house of Israel. When he says “it is not right to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” she turns his exclusionary response into an admission of her belonging: “even the dogs eat the crumbs from the children’s table.” Even she and her daughter belong.

And maybe that’s the value that the first writers of this Gospel account saw. In this event they understood what puzzled the early Church: that this message which was supposedly only for the Jews, was appealing more to Gentiles than to Jews.

The first disciples weren’t preaching to the Gentiles, but the Gospel spread to the Gentiles regardless *because the Gentiles demanded it*. Many of them were women: they were among the patrons of preachers like Paul and Timothy; the first evangelists; the first martyrs. We know the names of some of them: Phoebe; Julia; Priscilla; Aquila; Perpetua.

What goes into our mouths does not determine our worth. The stations and situations of our lives do not matter. What matters is what comes out of our mouths.

What matters is how we live our lives. As Joseph says to his brothers, God can turn evil to good and use our faithfulness to do so. Like the Canaanite woman, our faith can turn exclusion to inclusion.

The lesson in this text – the lesson about discipleship – is this: you *do* have what it takes. To change one person's day. To change one person's heart. To change one person's life. To change the church. To change the world. The only failure is not trying.