

Dogs

Matthew 15:21-28

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Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that moment.

What's your image of Jesus? If you were to spend time with him, what do you imagine he was like? What did his eyes look like? What about his voice—how did it sound? What about the way he carried himself? His energy? Do you imagine Jesus emanating a peaceful energy?

If this is your image of Jesus—there's good reason. We *ought* to have a sense for the kind of human being that Jesus was. How his body moved through social space. How he looked at people. The energy in him. This human being, after all, carried the love of God in his body. *Of course that energy was positive.*

Our tradition says that Jesus was both fully divine AND *fully human*. While it's hard for me—and maybe for you—to wrap my mind around what that means, the *fully human* part is surely visible in the stories where the limits of Jesus' humanity get stretched. I think about Jesus' trials in the wilderness—where he was tempted by self-serving desires. I think about Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when he falls down on his face saying "take this cup from me." On the cross Jesus cries out to God who, it feels like, has abandoned him to die. All these stories show us Jesus' *full* humanity; he is one of us. But maybe the most human story of all—and the most vexing to our image of Jesus—is the one where Jesus meets a foreign woman who needs his help. Jesus looks at her and says, "go away." When she presses him, he calls her "bitch."

It's *inconceivable*. How could Jesus do this? Yes, we want Jesus to be human—but not *that* human.

Most of us long ago decided that Jesus came to bless the whole world. It's hard for us to understand than in the early days of the Jesus movement there was a deep struggle over whether or not non-Jews could be included. This bitter struggle is written all over the letters of Paul, all over the book of Acts, and all over the gospels, but it still feels weird to us that most of Jesus' followers—and Jesus himself—assumed God cared for Jews only. The encounter between Jesus and the woman underscores that assumption—and it shows the mind-bending, paradigm-altering change that takes place when the "good news of God's reign" includes everyone. It's not a stretch to say that this woman is responsible for changing Jesus' mind about

the boundaries of God's salvation—she opens the door to a universal gospel and she sticks her foot in that door and keeps it there, even when Jesus tries to slam it shut.

What do you make of this story? Aside from the fact that a very human Jesus could be, at times, a jerk, what does this story mean for us today? Let's try three things.

One, it reminds us that any idea you have right now of who God loves and how much God loves them, that idea is probably too small, too narrow. If Jesus himself had to have his own boundaries of God's salvation widened, we might as well go ahead and admit our idea about God's love is too small. There simply is no room in the world for "us" and "them." Not in religion. Not in politics. Certainly not in our communities and neighborhoods.

I've often tried—and failed—to describe that this is what happens to us in baptism. Baptism is an initiation ritual—but instead of one that marks you as "in," baptism is an initiation ritual that marks you "out." When you are part of the body of Christ, you belong outside of whatever boundary culture has drawn—you belong with those who have been shut out.

If only that were as easy to do as it is to say. How hard it is for this church—for *any* community—to truly welcome everyone. We don't. I know we *want* to. But we don't look like the kingdom of God. Why? Because we're human. Human beings are masterful at differentiating ourselves—us here, you there. We justify those differences by giving them a moral dimension. We internalize these differences—they become part of our worldview—and we project them into our relationships. What does this look like in practice? How many hybrids are there in our parking lot? How many pickup trucks? That's a marker of difference. We sing hymns, not praise songs—that's a marker about who we welcome. I use big words in my sermons like "paradigm" and "paradox"—those are markers. We have been this quirky little progressive community so long, we may be unaware of what we project. We may be blind to the kinds of privilege and power. We may not know that we are being distant or hostile to people who are not like us.

Don't feel bad. Jesus did all these things, too.

But don't despair. Every one of us can raise our unconscious biases to the level of our conscious awareness. We can put energy into this work of compassion. Ask yourself, "how can I hold more gently to my own sense of what is normal and right in the world?" "Can I make room for—even seek out—folks with other sensibilities?" "In the way I act, or sing, or speak, or worship can I make others feel like they are part of my life?" "Can I communicate the limitless grace of God?" Very few of us can. But this story suggests that we should try.

A second thing you should take from this story is that sometimes our sense of the expansiveness of God's grace is changed not because we want it to, but because we pushed and provoked and even shamed into change. Jesus calls the woman a dog. But she is too smart, too sharp, too quick for his cruelty and she wants healing for her daughter too much to be dissuaded by Jesus. "Fine, I'm a dog. Even the dogs get to eat from the crumbs that fall under the master's table."

This woman should remind you over every group of human beings who has had to fight to be seen and fight for the basic dignity that should have been theirs to begin with. This woman should call to your mind the courageousness of every person spoke up and showed up and laid down in the streets during the Black Lives Matter protests. She should call to your mind every woman who has refused the strictures of patriarchy and insists on her fundamental freedom and worth. For the queer activists and freedom fighters who did—and still do—assert their dignity in the face of public and private violence. Frederick Douglass, in 1857, said something about that must never be forgotten, and should be written on the walls of every institution, and probably every church. He said:

"If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want the rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, and it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did, and it never will."

Power concedes nothing without a demand. As long as there are inequities in power in the world—and there are, there will be demands—and there will be conflict. You don't have to like the conflict. Sometimes you will be its target. When Jesus found himself on the wrong side of a demand, he conceded to what was right. And Jesus, it does appear, changed his mind.

I'd like to believe we're on the cusp of serious conversations about reparations for past harm. There is no way to deny, with any kind of intellectual, moral, or spiritual integrity, that genocide and the reservation system have had devastating generational impacts on indigenous Americans. Or that slavery and Jim Crow had devastating and generation impacts on Black Americans. Professor William Yoo at Columbia Seminary has written a powerful short book about the Presbyterian Church's investment in human slavery, and Yoo makes two powerful points: one is that without the wealth created by human slavery, there would be no Presbyterian Church in the United States; number two, our ancestors who were involved in slaveholding knew it was morally wrong, but the financial benefits were too great for them to oppose it.

In the same way this woman stands before Jesus and presents with an uncomfortable truth, history stands before white Americans and before Presbyterians, waiting for our response. It is my hope that our congregation's next 3 year plan, being developed right now, will include a statement about our congregation's relationship to the removal of indigenous people from this land, and about human slavery and Jim Crow on this land, and that we will our responsibility to help make what was a profound wrong into a right.

Here's the third and last thing I want to say about this text. It's *complicated*. These conversations about identity and difference and boundaries and justice and equality are hard. One of the reasons they're hard is that we very rarely find ourselves in a place where the injustice or the inequity is clear and the solution is obvious. Our identities have facets—one aspect of our identity may give us privilege, another puts us at a disadvantage. Who has more

power—a well-educated Asian woman or a poor gay white man? In truth, this story is probably complicated, too. It's long been assumed by interpreters that the woman who approaches Jesus—foreign, gentile, and a woman—is, in relation to him, powerless. We are stunned that Jesus could be so cruel to someone who is so relatively weak. But scholars who look more closely at this text now suspect, because of clues in the text, that she is from an elevated economic class. She's from a wealthy part of the region, especially compared to Galilee, where Jesus comes from. She's a rich lady. It could be that Jesus' anger at her comes from this difference between them—*why should I feed you, when you and your kind have watched me and my people go hungry?*

What's more, you also ought to know that Jesus comes to this encounter after a series of really painful interactions with fellow Jews. He's licking his wounds, having been rebuked and rejected by the people whose love he wanted most.

So, now we've really got a story, don't we? Jesus, a powerful male, but from a powerless economic group, bears a spiritual power in his body—power he wanted to share with his own people, but it was rejected and he's feeling wounded. And a woman (powerless), but from a powerful—even oppressive—economic group, approaches Jesus to ask him to share his spiritual power even though her cultural and religion suggest that she and this man share nothing in matters of spirit. Both of them, embedded in a nexus of political, economic, and religious forces they did not create, but which define the differences—visible and invisible—that should keep them separate. But now they are brought together. Both of them, in the moment, asking, “who are you to me and who am I to you?”

He says: “Your people have hurt my people. You're a dog.”

She says: “I'm a dog, perhaps. But I stand before you as a human being in deep need. Won't you help?”

Something... something in that moment changes. Something in that moment changes the entire complicated cultural, economic, political, gendered, religious relationship between them.

What creates that kind of change?

Our tradition has this strange expression: we say, “by grace we are saved.” By grace we are saved.