

NOT MY FAVORITE JESUS

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Matthew 15:10-28

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I begin this sermon with a disclaimer. By the end of this sermon, you probably will not be satisfied with my handling of or your own thinking about every aspect of the passage we read. I guess that's probably always true, but even more so today. And I actually hope you will be unsatisfied and will continue to study it. There are just too many uncomfortable things in these nineteen verses from the Gospel of Matthew to cover in one sermon. We're faced with crude words from Jesus, disciples who seem to understand nothing, a demon possessed child, a healing that happens from afar, annoyed disciples, Jesus seemingly ignoring a woman in need of help and then insulting her, the apparent limiting of Jesus' mission to Israel, and the acknowledgment of the woman's exceptionally great faith for no discernable reason. That's a lot to tackle. But one thing that we can learn at the outset from all of this is that life is messy and what the Bible does is speak to the truth about our life; it doesn't tie everything up neatly in a bow for us.

Now, I don't want to assume your thoughts after reading this passage from the Gospel of Matthew this morning, but I will tell you mine—I already told them to you in the title of the sermon. This is not my favorite portrayal of Jesus. If this were the only story we had of Jesus' life, I'm not exactly sure what I would think of him. He says things that are crude, and that seem downright rude. I'm not even going to discuss the crude talk, you heard it yourselves. As I would say to my girls, "it is not dinner table conversation."

Jesus seems abrupt throughout this text, but it is the second half of our reading when Jesus' rudeness really comes in. Did I miss something, or does Jesus, in fact, refer to the Canaanite woman as a dog?

It is hard to figure what to do with this.

So I read the text again. As it goes, Jesus gathers a crowd to him in order to teach them a lesson. He wants to make a distinction between ritual cleanliness and having a clean heart. The disciples seem to be worried that Jesus is unnecessarily stirring the pot, because this talk is upsetting the Pharisees. But Jesus doesn't seem to care. He has harsh words for the Pharisees—they are blind guides leading the blind, and all that's going to happen then is that everyone is going to fall into a pit. Peter, the disciple who notoriously always has something to say, and not always the smartest thing, says that they (the disciples) need Jesus to explain this lesson to them again. Jesus seems undone by that, too, and cannot believe the disciples still don't understand. This is when he delves into the crude use of bodily functions as an illustration. I guess he figures that might be something anyone could understand. And Jesus goes on to explain that it is really what comes out of the heart which defiles a person.

After that, Jesus leaves Jewish territory and along with his disciples, has an encounter with a Canaanite woman. There is a long and storied history between Jews and Canaanites, and this encounter involves the crossing of many boundaries—boundaries of race, gender, and ethnicity, among others. As we all know, it wasn't appropriate for a woman to address a man in public in this time and culture. But the Canaanite woman didn't just address Jesus, she began by shouting at him. This must have been a horribly awkward situation.

Jesus just ignored her at first. Which doesn't really seem like Jesus to me, and which is one of the reasons that this is not my favorite picture of Jesus. And all her shouting and carrying on, makes it no wonder that the disciples wanted Jesus to get rid of her quickly. But Jesus does finally address her concern. When he does, though, his language is not, well, generous. He refers to her as a dog. Now this is something that commentators have tried to deal with in a number of different ways, including trying to soften this harsh statement by pointing out that this word for dog is best translated "little dog" or "house dog." But that hardly makes it any better. Even so, commentators can't get around the fact that it is clear that Jesus is using a common derogatory term for Gentiles. What do we do with that?

The woman figures out something to do with it. She has a quick witted answer, and rather than being indignant at the insult, she says, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” And with that, Jesus seems to react differently to her, praising her great faith, and healing her demon-possessed daughter from afar, right there on the spot.

Each of the four Gospels has a different perspective, and the Gospel of Matthew is the most Jewish, let’s say, of all the Gospels. It was written to demonstrate that Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy, to show that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, and to address Jesus’ righteousness with regard to the law. And that also means that Jesus has a particular mission throughout Matthew. Salvation will come to the whole world, but that extension to the world comes at the end of the Gospel with the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...”¹ Throughout the Gospel, the role of Jesus is to bring salvation to Israel, through which salvation will come to the world. And so this Canaanite woman is outside of Jesus’ prescribed mission. And perhaps that is why Jesus did not seem enthusiastic about helping her.

Or perhaps there are just a lot of gaps here for us. When we read a text, we cannot see a sly wink, a smirk, or a raised eyebrow. We cannot hear a tone of voice. There is definitely the feel of banter between the woman and Jesus. Did Jesus use the term “dog” for the sake of the disciples? Did he do it to set her up so she could deliver her witty response? To see how she would react? There is a lot we cannot understand. Cultural mores. It’s the first century in a culture completely different than our own.

But there are a few things we can recognize. This is an encounter that occurred on the border—between old and new, between male and female, between Jew and Gentile, between friend and enemy, between holy and demonic.² Between the future mission of the Gospel and the present. Jesus challenges all the artificial borders that have been established, just as he did earlier with the Pharisees—artificial ritual borders of clean and unclean. When barriers are broken down, things don’t always go smoothly. And our reaction to Jesus’ apparent harsh words reminds us that Jesus does not always do what we expect or what we want him to do. And finally, we are reminded that no matter how it started, this encounter ended with healing. It ended with grace. And that is always God’s final word to us.

As I read and re-read this story, I wondered, as I often do, who you and I are more like in this story. Are we the kind of people who make a scene over Jesus the way the Canaanite woman did? Or are we more like the disciples, who are concerned about just the opposite. Actually, I didn’t wonder all that much. Most of us are not that into making scenes. The disciples, who I imagine are very much like you and me, seemed to have some other things on their mind throughout this passage. One of their concerns was upsetting the Pharisees. They were more concerned about that than they were about understanding what Jesus was teaching. And then when they had the encounter with the Canaanite woman, their concern seemed to be with their own discomfort about the awkwardness of the situation. Or about how much time or effort this might take. They seem to be worried most of all about their own lives being upset, about a general sense of discomfort and trouble. They are troubled that Jesus has said these words that have upset the Pharisees. They wish he had left well enough alone. And then, when encountering the Canaanite woman, they want Jesus to deal with her, not because they have any compassion for her, but just so that she will leave them alone. They really dislike these disruptions to their lives. The disciples seem to think following Jesus means that things will always be peaceful and calm in his presence.

But I don’t feel peaceful and calm when I read this passage. Particularly when I realize how much I am like the disciples. Particularly this week, when I consider the horrifying display of racism in Charlottesville and the varied responses to it both there and around the country. I feel troubled and unsettled and convicted.

The disciples also didn’t want to put forth the effort to listen. They don’t listen well to Jesus’ teaching and they sure don’t want to listen to the shouting Canaanite woman. That might also be the way that you and I are. We don’t want to listen to any of this. We’d rather put it behind us. Pretend it’s not happening. Just keep hanging out with Jesus without anyone getting upset, especially us.

¹ Matthew 28:19a, NRSV

² Thomas G. Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*, p. 174.

As I close, I want to read to you something about a church during the 1960s. These people were disciples who, like the disciples from our passage today, had trouble with the loud voices in their culture that were doing things that they felt were socially unacceptable, that were involved in breaking down boundaries, that were stirring the pot. But eventually, this church learned to listen. See if the first part of this story reminds you of the disciples' reaction to the Canaanite woman. See if this reminds you of current events, especially of the events of the past week or so. This was written several decades ago, so please forgive anything that is not phrased exactly as we would today: *“What began as a disquieting tremor beneath our calm exterior during the fifties, became a bone-rattling rumble during the sixties. The peaceful racial demonstrations became tumultuous and destructive riots. Instead of eating goldfish and packing people into phone booths, students began staging violent protests and burning draft cards, and fanatics began shooting down national heroes. Issues our nation and community had always been too busy to deal with before, suddenly began dealing with us. It seemed every time we turned on our televisions, somebody we did not understand was wanting something we thought unreasonable. At first, many of us tried to ignore it, hoping it would all ‘go away’ as it had done so many times before. Instead, it grew louder and more threatening...So the people of our church began to listen as never before. We disliked their methods, but began to grapple with their plights. Admittedly, some of us did not listen very well in the beginning; we couldn’t distinguish what they were saying because of the extremes of their language and antics. But gradually we began to hear more of what they were saying. Slowly, ever so slowly at first, the social conscience of our church began to awaken...Many of our people began looking beyond ‘fixing the blame’ toward ‘solving the problems.’ Our efforts to search for an authentic Christian response quickened in pace and broadened in scope.”*³

And then the book goes on to talk about increased political activism, increased mission work, benevolence giving, interracial dialogue, work with refugees, ordaining its first women as deacons and elders, and a number of other ways that this church grew during this period. I imagine that some of the ways that this church described its initial reaction to the tumult of the 1960s may be feeling familiar to some of you now. And what I hope is that the point that this church came to is a place that we will come to soon, and it should feel like a familiar path, too. Because what I just read is from a book entitled *We, The People of God* which is a history of First Presbyterian Church in High Point, North Carolina from 1959 to 1984.

And I wonder who we are today, how long it will take us to listen to Jesus and the world around us, and what story we would write about ourselves today. Or if we are more like the disciples in today's text, whose primary concern is making sure Jesus' words don't rattle anyone, and making sure our lives don't get disrupted by any shouting Canaanite woman in need of healing.

May God grant us the grace to listen to Jesus and to listen to world.
Amen.

³ From *“We, The People of God” First Presbyterian Church, High Point, NC 1959-1984*, p. 48.