

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 15:21-28

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.

Every Friday morning, before I start writing the sermon, I spend some time drinking coffee and talking with my girlfriend in Lititz, PA on Skype. It's a great way to stay connected through the in-between times when we are able to meet somewhere to do something together.

I was telling her my plans for the day, which she knows always involves writing the sermon. I was confessing that this sermon was focused on a challenging text from the lectionary; and I started to tell her about the text, admitting that the difficult part of the text is when Jesus essentially calls the woman a dog. I saw a look of shock on her face, and she said she was not familiar with this story. Even as a long-time Christian, she doesn't remember ever hearing or reading it.

I really wasn't surprised. It is a challenging text to grapple with because we are not comfortable with the Jesus that is portrayed here. The Jesus we know is compassionate, kind and loving; but in this story, Jesus seems gruff and uncaring, the total opposite of what we expect, especially because of his many teachings of loving everyone. It's easier to overlook this story and write-it-off as an oops in the bible. But even the challenging texts in the bible have valuable lessons for us that we should not ignore. So, what does this story teach us.

Let's begin, as we often times need to do, by looking into the context of the story. Prior to this Jesus had an unpleasant encounter with Pharisees from Jerusalem. He stepped on their toes by calling them hypocrites once again. He calls them to accountability using the prophet Isaiah's words, "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules." He turned to the crowd that was listening to this conversation and he said to them, "Listen and understand. What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them."

Jesus was referring here to the Jewish regulations about what people could and could not eat. What he said could be better understood when appropriately interpreted as: "You aren't made unclean by eating non-kosher food! It is what you say and think that makes you unclean!" The Pharisees were insulted by this.

The disciples, then, confront Jesus, saying, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?" We read then in verses 13-20: He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. 14 Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." 15 But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." 16 Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? 17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? 18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. 19

For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

We can give an appearance on the outside that is contrary to what really exists on the inside of us. We may work hard to put on a positive holy appearance to others, but God knows what is really happening inside of us. Jesus warns that stuff is going to slip out of us through words and actions that may reveal our ugly side. He encourages us to always be seeking to feed ourselves with Godly spiritual nourishment that makes us healthy on the spiritual inside, filling us with healthy thoughts and motives that then influence who we are on the outside.

This story is an optional text included in the lectionary. Perhaps it is optional because it may appear to complicate for us, the story we read this morning as hear about Jesus' response to the woman who came to him. But let's continue now with today's text.

After the encounter with the Pharisees, Jesus needs to get away again. So he and his disciples leave the shores of Galilee and travel to Tyre and Sidon (what today is part of Lebanon). This was considered an unclean region by the Jews. It was an area with widespread pagans and idol worship. It really was not the kind of place Jesus was expected to wander into, but he did, and he has this encounter with a Canaanite woman.

Canaanites were the earliest inhabitants of this region and were known to be long-hardened pagans and enemies of Jewish monotheistic faith and commitment. This made having a conversation with her a behavior looked down upon. Making the situation more tenuous was the fact that there were strict behavioral codes of decency in Near Eastern culture which sternly frowned on women and men socializing. But remember, this woman approached Jesus, which puts her character into question. "Adding to all of this that we know about the woman already, she has a daughter who is possessed by a demon. In an age in which it was a commonly held conviction that all diseases — but especially demonic possession — resulted from past sinfulness of the possessed person or a family member, this woman's character rating drops even more. It makes one wonder what she has done in her life to have earned such a curse on her daughter?"

Yet she comes to Jesus, obviously knowing who he is and knowing that everything about this encounter was forbidden. She approached him with an attitude of worship, calling him, "Lord, Son of David." Her plea to him is that he heal her demon-possessed daughter.

Here's where things start getting sticky for us. At first, Jesus ignores her, but she persists. The disciples, annoyed by her insistence, tell Jesus that he should send her away. His reply to the disciples was, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel"

Jesus' response is not a contradiction to God's plan. Jesus was sent to give the opportunity for salvation to the Jews first, who were then to take the Good News of salvation to the rest of the world. It's only after the crucifixion and resurrection that the door is swung wide open to the non-Jewish world. Remember, Jesus was in hostile territory when this encounter took place, as he had been other times, and he ministered to Gentiles in those places. He seemed to cross over that line in God's plan sometimes.

In fact, not long before this encounter, there is a story told in Matthew 8:5-13 about a Roman centurion who came to ask Jesus to heal a servant who was at home paralyzed and suffering terribly. After some dialogue, granted that request. Jesus did care about the centurion and this woman, but here, Jesus was simply stating the facts to this woman.

The woman persists with her request, and in spite of what he said thus far, she calls him, "Lord" indicating she asks again, worshipfully. This time Jesus' response includes calling her a

"dog" when he said, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." This is what really shocks us. It sounds like a put-down, and indeed, it is not a term of endearment.

There have been many explanations given for why Jesus this. Some say, Jesus was making a joke. Others say he is not talking junkyard dogs here, but house dogs or puppies. Others suggest that while Jesus didn't personally liken Canaanites with dogs, he knew others thought that way, so he spoke the term aloud so people could hear how shocking it sounded. Still others say Jesus never would have said this if he hadn't been tired.

The scripture, however, tells us that Jesus likened her to a dog. He used the term commonly used in those days that was given to the pagan Gentiles. The point being that Jesus was once again stating the mission, he was sent first to bring salvation to the Jews, who would then take it to the rest of the world.

Here's where we get to the meat of the story. The woman had every right to take offense to what Jesus said, she could have laid into Jesus with angry words, or stomped off cursing and swearing, but she didn't. Even after likening her to a dog, she comes back to him worshipfully calling him, "Lord," and went on to say, "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

We hear that she was willing to be likened to a dog, acknowledging her secondary status as long as she could get some food from the table too. She accepted that she was an outsider, but she was willing to take the risk of asking Jesus for help, believing that he could cross over that line between Jews and Gentiles, to one who had faith. Her persistence along with her worshipful approach and attitude paid off. Jesus sees that her faith is great; and from a distance, Jesus healed the daughter. That's the last thing we hear about this woman.

So, what are we to learn from this story? Is the lesson that if we have great faith, Jesus will send miracles of healing and such down upon us and our loved ones? Admittedly, a healing does happen; but this is more a story about outsiders. Have you ever felt like an outsider? I have.

I was never popular in school, and yet I accomplished getting my education. Perhaps the greatest reward was finding my amazing husband in high school. I was an outsider as a woman seeking to answer her call to pastoral ministry. I could have given up, and I knew that was an option, but I had faith that God would use me in spite of people believing a woman should never be a pastor.

But this story made me think of a place where I felt more like an outsider than anywhere else and that was among my family of Amish relatives. Because my father was shunned by his family for leaving the Amish Church, he could not sit at the table for a meal with them. It is my understanding that my mom, brother and I could have sat at the family table because in my family's thinking, "we were never Amish and so we didn't know any better," but we chose to sit with dad. We sat at the card table set up away from the main table. We were the outsiders. Even though I could have sat at the main table, I was still the outsider. It certainly was not a comfortable situation, one that continues to stir feelings of pain in me, not as much for myself, but for my dad.

There may be people in our lives that get treated as outsiders. They may be content to just receive the crumbs from our tables, a word assuring them that God loves them, a promise to pray for them, a lesson about God's grace. But imagine how much more we each can do for them if we welcome them to the table.

What would that look like? Would it involve forgiveness of someone who wronged us? Would it involve acceptance and respect for others despite our differences? Yes. Yes, and yes.

Would it include giving up some time to be involved in a church ministry; or reaching out on our own to help a neighbor we don't even know, or think we want to know based on our prejudices and perceptions?

Would it involve supporting and directing someone with an addiction or who is homeless or who has mental health issues, towards the resources and help that might bring lasting change to their lives for the better; rather than enabling them to continue unhealthy physical and social behavior or making bad choices, just to get them off our backs...or giving direction and encouragement towards positive and lasting change? Jesus was not an enabler. He expected change.

Would reaching out to the outsider involve sitting in the stark uncomfortable quiet with the suffering or grieving person, just to be there with them, because we don't know what to say?

Who are the outsiders? Who are your outsiders? It is a personal question, even if we look to the church for solutions to bring them to the table. It's personal because each one of us are a part of the body of the church and need to be involved for the body to function. How we treat the outsider reveals what is hidden in our hearts. Which takes us back to what Jesus told the Pharisees prior to this story.

What is revealed in our hearts also surfaces as we are confronted with those times when we find ourselves in the role of the outsider, particularly when we feel God is ignoring us? We've all probably been there at one time or other. How should we handle that? What should our attitudes be? Some may choose to hang up their faith and turn away from God in frustration and anger.

The Canaanite woman shows us a different way. She accepts the realities of her situation, yet persists with her pleas to Jesus with a worshipful heart, even willing to take whatever he would give, with gratitude for what would be given. We learn from the woman that it's not about what we can get from God, but that the door is open to us, and we are welcomed at the table, to be loved, cared for, heard, and best of all to have a relationship with our Savior Jesus Christ and God, our Heavenly Father. Jesus made a place at the table for her. He has a place at the table for us too. Amen.