

Context is paramount in engaging this morning's passage. Matthew's author writes for a faith community that identifies itself as distinctly Jewish. *Distinct* is an important adjective. What makes this community distinct is that they affirm Jesus as Messiah in an era where most Jewish communities do not. And it's this distinction that will ultimately marginalize and alienate Matthew's community from their neighbors. The author intends to reassert the Jewishness of Jesus – a new Moses, one who does not abolish Torah, but fulfills it.

We also need to remember that the Gospel of Matthew was written at least a half-century after the death of Jesus. Jewish Jesus followers are being persecuted in the present by groups like the Pharisees and Sadducees. The angst and resentment this community feels for its enemies is often reflected in the text – it's fair to say that the toxicities of the present are projected upon the past. Thus, there will be instances when we must parse the feelings/actions/words of the author and their fellow community members from those of Jesus.

When we meet Jesus this morning, he's dealing with a universal problem experienced by any faith leader in any generation. For some, he's not Jewish enough. For others he's too Jewish. And in nearly every instance, be they friend, relative, neighbor, or stranger, people misunderstand all that he's trying to be and do.

Jesus lives under Roman occupation. Rome seeks to rob/rid the cultures of non-Roman persons, and assimilate them, by any means necessary, into the empire. It's important to note that the Jewish Diaspora maintained its culture, traditions, and identity during this era through a strict adherence to Torah. Diet, worship rituals, wealth transfer, marriage customs, and hierarchies were all integral to survival. But somewhere along the way, the law became disconnected from the

spirit. Torah was less a way to honor God, and more a way to prop up a religious establishment.

Jesus protests the hypocrisy of religious leaders who would elevate the importance of diet over the importance of meeting human need. Rome barely allows its peasants to eat, and yet religious leaders would presume to litigate the righteousness of the scraps they receive. Sabbath is a day set aside to worship and learn about the ways to honor God – mainly the love of neighbor, creation, and God – and yet religious leaders balk at the healing of others before the church bells ring.

For too many, Jesus didn't love God within the right parameters. There isn't anywhere Jesus goes that he doesn't face their disapproval – even in his hometown!

And Jesus lives among disciples. The disciples are certainly not always as aloof as the texts may make them appear. But the disciples haven't yet fully bought into the idea that Jesus is offering them the same kind of liberation, the same kind of manna, the same of kind of God-centered-living that Moses offered the Israelites in the wilderness.

If you are looking for ways to understand the humanity of Jesus, I think this text is a good place to start. Who among us hasn't, at some point, felt misunderstood?!? And who among us has not felt a sense of frustration or exasperation at being misunderstood, and then expressed such frustration in an abrasive way to someone who didn't deserve it?

Jesus is seeking to be his authentic, divinely called self, and for that he is misunderstood. And to make matters worse, he's got the attention of local religious authorities, (and not the good kind of attention!), and he's gonna lay low in the region of Tyre and Sidon for a little while.

Nevertheless, She Persisted  
Bob Stillerman  
12th Sunday After Pentecost, 8/20/2023  
Matthew 15:21-28



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This is Gentile country. But if we are using our Exodus language, you might call it Canaan, the very land Moses is called to occupy on Israel's behalf. Please tell me you see the irony here: Jesus is going into Canaan to minister to Israelites.

I think a lot of us struggle with the inconsistencies of the Exodus story. The liberation of the Israelites is a good thing. We see God's investment in humanity. But the chosen status the Israelites proclaim removes the shine. The new land they seek to occupy also requires the removal of an entire people group, and it doesn't seem like the Canaanites have done anything to deserve their fate. Over the generations, there becomes a world of righteous and unrighteous. And the prevailing consensus, Jesus included, is that the love, mercy, grace, and abundance of God must flow to the righteous (the people of Israel), before it can eventually trickle down or expand outward to others.

Let's put it all together. Jesus is feeling agitated and misunderstood. He's laying low in Gentile territory. And at this point in his ministry, Jesus still subscribes to the traditional idea of Mosaic covenant – God working first through Israel.

Tyre and Sidon are border towns, so even in the land of Canaan, even amid people with varying religious practices, there are still a fair number of faithful Jewish people. And chances are, if they live in Tyre and Sidon, they are socially marginalized, so they will be more open to receiving the ministry and hospitality of a provocative rabbi.

On this morning, Jesus finds himself well-occupied by his work – plenty of people to heal, to teach, to listen to, to congregate with.

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From the crowd, comes a persistent voice. It's the voice of a Canaanite woman (Syrophoenician for you scholars). Her daughter is not well, and she intends to help make her well again. But this woman doesn't fit into the neatly diagramed plans of the Mosaic model. Jesus has a plan. The triage is in motion. Fair or unfair, Jesus has been called to help Israel. There aren't enough resources to go around.

So...Jesus ignores this woman, and continues his work.

Nevertheless, she persists. And thank God for such persistence!!!

The disciples try to shoosh her. No luck. They tell her to stand behind the rope. Not a chance! She will disrupt. She will fight on. She will be seen. She will be heard. She ain't going anywhere.

I really like this person! And I'm so glad God gave her gifts to us!!!

But Jesus. Well Jesus is in a mood. Maybe he's hangry. Maybe he's just exhausted. Maybe he's just having a day where he's overwhelmed by the magnitude of his calling. Is it not enough that he must be subjected to the short-sightedness of his own faith community, and now he's got to hear it from those beyond it, too? Enough is enough. He's had it.

He takes a deep breath. He seeks to be measured one last time.  
"Madam, my calling is to the people of Israel. Please respect this boundary."

She'll have none of it. "Help me. Help me. Help me. Help me," she says.

The tension escalates. And in my opinion, Jesus says the meanest, and perhaps the only mean thing he says in all of scripture: “Madam, it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Those words sting. And there’s no putting the toothpaste back inside the tube. And as we read, the words hang with a finality and cruelty. This is just the way the world is.

But faithful women persist. And faithful women change the world. This woman – this mother, this daughter, this sister, this survivor, this child of God doesn’t flinch, doesn’t back down, doesn’t give in. “Yes, Lord,” she says, “Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

I would argue that this statement, maybe even more than Mary’s proclamation, “He is risen,” changes the trajectory of our world. For it is in this moment that Torah is fulfilled in a new and compelling way.

Jesus realizes he is wrong. He realizes that just as Torah cannot be reduced to a rigid and spiritless fundamentalism, nor can Israel be reduced to a defined demographic. God’s love, God’s grace, God’s abundance, God’s joy are not to be contained. God is for everybody, and everything, and every place.

Moses, with God’s help, liberated Israel from Pharoah, and brought covenant through Torah, to connect God, people, and land. Jesus, with God’s help, will liberate humanity, and bring a new covenant rooted in spirit, and fused in grace and love.

The wise and faithful words of this woman crystalize the transformative ministry of Jesus. In an instant, Jesus understands that his work will

overturn every system imaginable. In an instant, Jesus realizes that he is called to serve ALL he encounters.

One last irony. Jesus, impressed by the faithfulness of this woman, proclaims, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." The text tells us her daughter was healed from that moment. Yes, yes, yes, a daughter has been made well. But it seems to me, Jesus is the one who's been healed and made well.

And let me tell you, friends, I believe that's a gospel worth hearing!!! Jesus has the humility to hear new theological perspectives, to grow, and even implement them into his living. And people like the Syrophenician Woman can create transcendence for our world, simply by being true to themselves.

It's funny. There's nothing polite about this story. But in hearing it told, is there any other way we might desire to order our world than through a dialogue of persistence, and gruffness, and even a little hangriness, that expedites justice and kin-dom moments?

Long ago, a faithful woman insisted that God was big enough and bold enough to heal the world, her neighborhood included. And so she persisted. May God give us the courage to do the same.

May it be so. And may it be soon! Amen.