

3 of us met on Wednesday to discuss this gospel story. I had prepared a blank sheet that had these words down the left side: Woman/Jesus/Woman/Jesus/Woman/Jesus. With a little narration at the beginning and the end, and 1 interjection from the disciples, that is the flow of the passage. It becomes obvious, when you outline the text in that way, that it is mainly a conversation between Jesus and the woman, back and forth, back and forth. I read through the story 3 times, slowly, asking the other 2 to see what stood out to them. It was very interesting, because for one of them it was Jesus’ words: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” (how could he be so excluding? So insulting? Even if that was a common way for Jews to refer to Gentiles in his time, why would he participate in it? Isn’t he supposed to be above that? Challenge that?) and for the other it was the woman’s words: “Yes but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” (“she is so persistent! assertive; some have called her cheeky; one might even say aggressive; obnoxiously so. She is not about to take no for an answer.....)

So in these 2 reactions, these 2 responses, we hit upon the central dynamics of this passage: what is it about the woman that shifts Jesus out of his focus only on the lost sheep of Israel, and what might her persistence have to teach us about faith?

Let’s start with Jesus’ comment: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” These words sound so hurtful, and excluding. We thought Jesus was for everyone; he is, after all, the one who told the story of the GOOD Gentile (good Samaritan), and that he was always challenging other kinds of exclusionary practices of his people: women, lepers, tax collectors and sinners.

There has been such variety of attempts to make some sense of this. Some scholars say that the word used for “dog” is not really pejorative, but actually affectionate, so that changes the apparent bite of it. But a dog is a dog, even if a nice dog. Why would Jesus speak in this way? Another possibility: Jesus’ “offensive” question is rhetorical. He articulates the “traditional” disdain, the traditional “barrier” between Jew and Gentile mainly for the benefit of the disciples; for them to see how that traditional disdain can be challenged and the barrier between Jew & Gentile pulled down. In other words, he is always, always teaching them. Yet another possibility: we note that Jesus does actually offer a reason as to why he would not take time for the woman: “I was sent *only* to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” It is a statement of focus/mission/purpose. We know that focus is important in our lives. Maybe we want or imagine different foci for Jesus , ones that fit closer to what we would like him to have: it should include US, for starters. Most of us here would be Gentiles, like the Canaanite woman.

So, when he says “I was sent only...” it means, partly, a *limitation* on what is going to be attempted. He is not going to go around the whole world. That can be left for other people, like

the apostle Paul. To focus on the lost sheep of the house of Israel could be for the reason that if the lost sheep of the house of Israel ever got the message straight, ever came round, the rest of the world just might receive a gift, because it would shine. Anyway, that's where Jesus is at, at this point. Maybe being human, as he was, means that his understanding of his focus and purpose changes with time. Maybe this woman was part of that.

Before we turn to the other part of the story, the woman, it is helpful to look at the stories that Matthew places right before this one. At the end of chapter 13, Jesus is rejected in his own home town of Nazareth, which leads to his statement "Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house." He could do nothing because of their unbelief. Then his buddy John the Baptist was beheaded. That must have been more than sobering. Then we have the story that immediately precedes ours: the religious leaders come to him with a complaint: "Why do your disciples break the tradition and eat w/o washing their hands?" Jesus response makes clear what he makes of how lost his own people have become: they have lost the point of the Law that was meant to be gift to them; they have become hypocrites, paying more attention to the outside of things (are your hands clean or not?) than the heart (are you seeking to love your neighbour?) "*For the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.*" Or a New Jerusalem translation of the parallel in Mark: "*How ingeniously you get around the commandment of God in order to preserve your own traditions!*" (Mk 7:9) It goes on and on: Jesus' own people have become hard, tough ground, yet this is his given path, to speak to them. And into this adversarial world of unreceptivity and rejection, enters the Canaanite woman, begging for Jesus' attention.

The disciples just want her to stop shouting and go away. But she persists and breaks through the barrier. She was Canaanite. She doesn't know the Hebrew Scripture. She doesn't know the law. She is not educated. She does not know about the one true God. She supposedly does not know about tithing, the importance of Sabbath, the difference between right and wrong, righteousness and unrighteousness, as they do, obviously, by how they wash their hands before they eat ☺ Nor is she perplexed, as the disciples were, by who Jesus was and what he offered. Nor is she concerned about whether he does or doesn't eat with tax collectors and other people of questionable social reputation. Nor does she seem to be thwarted by the norm that women wouldn't usually be the ones coming, speaking, addressing a man in public. She is utterly one-minded: she has a daughter plagued by something life-threatening and she sees Jesus as someone who can help. And she throws herself on his mercy. She shouts after him so much that the disciples BEG JESUS to turn her away. Given the metaphor in this story, about food, and hunger, she is obviously "hungry": "I want to eat. You have food. Give it to me." She is very focused. She desires one thing, and she seems quite convinced that Jesus is one who can provide what she needs.

Jesus *doesn't* welcome her; she just makes herself at home. He *doesn't* include her, she *makes sure* she is included not with power but by simply sitting herself down at the heavenly banquet. She is declaring the reality of her presence: "I'm here; I know I'm not wanted; deal

with it.”¹

And in her persistence and humility she draws Jesus away from his stated focus of ministry to the lost sheep of Israel. She stretches his focus. He hears her. He sees her: “great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you desire.” Her cheeky obnoxiousness is blessed.

The wonderful irony here is that whereas Jesus focus, on nurturing the faith of the lost sheep of Israel has met with many obstacles, here, in supposedly hard and stony ground of Canaan, his being, his work, his message is completely received and absorbed.

Here it is, in this unchosen, unwanted woman: the faith he has been trying to enliven.

And so we are all blessed through her,

Because she has something that even the disciples seem to have, at this point, and certainly not the leaders in Israel.

She has faith in Jesus,

Enough to kneel down and beg,

Enough to fight

Enough to persist,

Enough to bring about a healing for her daughter.

She is willing to accept even the littlest bit, the leftover.

I thought of titling this sermon “No prerequisites”.

There is such a contrast between her and the Pharisees who were described just earlier.

They come with their hands full; they have the law; they have the account of their good deeds, all the good things they have done.

She comes with her hands empty. She has no rights here; she has no credits, no standing.

Maybe precisely because of her emptiness She is able to zero in precisely on what Jesus is all about, and so teach us “religious” types, even now, 2000 years later:

It is not dutifully following the law, coming to church, washing our hands and faces and being, to all appearances, good and clean and dutiful that will actually bring us life.

It is the unabashed, straight-forward trust in Jesus.

Maybe somehow we have gotten the message that

What God REALLY wants from us that we behave well.

Goodness has become the pre-req.

We have this image of God as one who can’t look upon our sin.

Maybe we are utterly mistaken.

Our preoccupation with supposed “goodness” does not necessarily have much to do with God.

Righteousness is about trusting relationship, which always includes vulnerability.

And that trust can have the most unusual garb.

I can’t help recall, again, the story of a congregation in TO. Transvestites started coming. The good church people swallowed hard and for the most part welcomed them, and in so doing,

¹ This paragraph mostly quotes, some paraphrase of Clay Nelson “messiahs are from mars”

learned something about God, and about faith: “They taught us how to be church.”

We all have our “Canaanite women”: people who bother us, and shout at us, and we just want to ignore them, or flick them aside; they don’t fit our picture of “good church people”. Maybe the world is full of Canaanite women, hungry for the food that Jesus offers, and we ignore them, or push them aside, because they bother us, or inconvenience us, and yet, *those who are hungry have such a gift to offer to us all*: maybe we need to feel a bit of hunger. Maybe a bit of hunger is exactly what we need.

May we be blessed with some hunger for what this person Jesus, Son of David, Son of God, has to offer.

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