

Proper 15A
Matthew 15:21-28

When I was in the 1st grade, teachers assigned students to reading groups based on how well they could read. They would name all the groups after birds so that everyone would feel equal but you could always tell how well you were doing by what bird your group was named after. There were eagles, robins, and pigeons. The pigeons were not reading War and Peace.

I mention that little piece of my personal history because one of the ways to think about Jesus' interesting encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman is to think about in terms of a group of people-the disciples- who totally misunderstand the assignment and as a result wind up in the pigeon group.

Jesus has traveled north-the only time the gospels report that he left his native land; why we don't know- was it to get some rest, get away from the groups that surrounded and hounded him everywhere he went? Or was it in fact a teaching moment for the disciples? To expand their horizons, take them out of their comfort zone and see how they would respond to a moment of ministry? In any case, apparently his fame had preceded the Nazarene for almost immediately a desperate woman approaches Jesus and his friends. Matthew tells us that the woman approaches Jesus with the traditional cry of the beggar: have mercy on me. She humbles herself and adds the title "Lord" – a term she will repeat twice more. She calls him Son of David. She knows something of Judaism and is deeply respectful.

Jesus does not say a word. Matthew deliberately draws our attention to this point. This woman's daughter is suffering terribly but when the woman appeals to Jesus with humility and reverence, he acts as if he doesn't hear. She must decide if she's willing to persevere.

Meanwhile, Jesus wants to see how the disciples will react. He ignores the woman to see what they will do. "Send her away," they say, "she keeps crying out after us." They are exaggerating a little-there is no indication the woman approached them. But they're confident Jesus will do what they say.

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," Jesus responds, apparently agreeing with them. "I was sent to Israel, God's favorites." Good call. Let's send her away.

Only he doesn't send her away, but watches the disciples to see how they will respond. Will any of his students understand that many are coming 'from the east and the west'-from beyond the narrow borders of Judaism? Can they grasp that he has come as a savior for the whole world including a Canaanite woman? Will anyone say a word on behalf on the woman?

No. They all nod their heads.

But the woman will not go away. In her mind she can hear her daughter's screams. Maybe it is desperation. Maybe it is trust. She kneels on the ground and utters a single phrase, "Lord, help me."

Now the tension in the disciples starts to build. Their theology tells them this woman is to be shunned, rejected. They would say just the same thing Jesus did.

And yet... they listen to the anguished plea of a heart-sick mother for a suffering child. Something in them is moved. This is striking at deep assumptions about whom God loves. Could it be that God is bigger than their theology?

Jesus speaks again-it may be that he is still facing the disciples. "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."- Dog being a derogatory slang term for gentile. To our ears it doesn't sound like a nice thing to say to a person-any person. It is one thing to have contempt for someone behind his or her back. It is another thing to hear the ugliness of our thoughts and feelings expressed out loud to a real human being. Maybe Jesus is just having a bad day or has decided to employ the Fishwick style of interpersonal relationships! Or maybe he is just trying to support his friends?

In any case the woman's response is remarkable. "Yes, Lord," she says, calling him 'Lord' for the third time. "But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Here is a woman who comes back at Jesus with grit, grace, and even wit. She has an attitude.

"You are still my Lord and master." Go ahead and make it look like you are pushing me away. I'm not going anywhere. By all means, feed your own-but I bet you have a crumb even for me-the old dog that I am. I bet you do.

She just won't give up.

Finally Jesus turns to face the woman. Finally the mask is off. For a moment Jesus conceals the great goodness of his heart but that moment is quickly past. The test is over. She aced the final.

“O woman,” he says, “great is your faith.”

The disciples look on in astonishment. This woman the outsider-their inferior has been given one of the greatest commendations ever bestowed by the one they follow so closely and thought they knew so well. It turns out they—who thought they basked in the exclusivity of what C.S. Lewis called, the ‘Inner Ring’ belong in the pigeon reading group. The pagan gentile woman turns out to be in the Eagles reading group.

“My brothers and sisters, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism,” writes James. Jesus’ followers are still tested in offices and shops, in classrooms and even in churches, they are tested at the boundary lines between nations, races and cultures, around breakfast tables and the family room.

The story of the Syro-Phoenician woman shows what we are all so slow to grasp: that the most available group of people to enter God’s kingdom are the most humble—regardless of whom they are and where they come from. This scripture reminds us that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are determined that the circle of love they share from all eternity should be ceaselessly shamelessly inclusive. None are left out except those who refuse to enter.

Just when you think that you have figured Christianity all out and you are in the inner ring and someone else isn’t might just be the time, you flunk. A better strategy than the ugly self-righteousness displayed by the disciples might be to throw yourself on the ground and utter these words, Lord have mercy. For the believer, humility is a good thing. Amen.