

What's Left to Learn?

Matthew 15:22-29

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There's a story about one of my favorite old, Baptist preachers, John Claypool, that goes like this:

On one occasion when his Baptist church was observing communion, John decided to address the fact that the early Christians – and still many churches today – used real wine in the observance. In fact, when Jesus turned the water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, it was genuine fermented wine.

"There are two Greek words for wine," John told them. "One is a word that means unfermented wine. The other is a word that means fermented wine. In the New Testament story the latter word is used. Jesus turned the water into fermented wine."

Standing at the door after worship, John was addressed by one of the teetotaling women in his church. "Dr. Claypool, you must be mixed up. Jesus would never have made a fermented wine for the people to drink. I just can't believe that!"

John invited the woman to come by the office that week so they could look at the passages together. She agreed and John laid out his lectionaries and was all prepared for a Greek lesson when she arrived.

He explained that in John 2, the Greek word used is *oinos* which is the fermented wine. The Greek word for the wine that does not intoxicate is *ethikos*.

Now," said John, "do you not agree that Jesus did make the water into real wine?"

"Well, . . . yes, I suppose so" the woman said. "But I would think a lot more of him if he hadn't done it!"

Sometimes, we come across a story when we'd like Jesus better *if he hadn't done it*. This story is one of those for me.

When I was still just a small child my mom taught me that "if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all..."

Based on my own personal experience of when I didn't obey my mom, I can tell you that if she'd been there when Jesus called this woman a dog, she would have washed his mouth out with soap.

What is going on here? Why did Jesus treat this woman so poorly? We just got done singing, "I am who You say I am." But what if who Jesus says you are is a dog? What then?

The crazy part is that Jesus had just finished teaching the crowds that “it is not what goes into the mouth (not what you eat) that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth (what you say) that defiles...” (Matthew 15:10-11). That’s because “what comes out of the mouth (what you say) proceeds from the heart” (Matthew 15:18).

What we say reveals the state of our heart, and what Jesus says to this woman is that she is a dog, unworthy of his attention – which makes it, maybe, the most disturbing story in the gospels.

Jesus is in Gentile territory. “Tyre and Sidon” were code names to early Bible readers for “paganland.” In Matthew’s gospel, this is the only time when Jesus leaves Israel’s borders. The Canaanites were their ancient enemies – which is a strange description, because there were no Canaanites in Jesus’ day. That’s like calling a modern day visitor from Denmark a Viking.

And this is the first Gentile woman with whom Jesus deals. Something in the color of her skin, the shape of her face, her accent, or her attire makes her seem less important.

She shouts at him: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David. My daughter is tormented by a demon. She is suffering.”

She knows what they’re thinking: “She’s not Jewish, and she’s a *she*. She doesn’t believe anything we believe. Her people are heathens, and she’s acting like one, too. There’s no way she’s going to get help here.”

But she calls out to Jesus, nonetheless: “Lord, have mercy on me!”

Now, the NRSV says, “But he did not answer her at all” (Matt. 15:23). A more accurate translation is, “But he did not answer her with a single word.” He wouldn’t waste a word on her. “If you can’t say something nice...”

She doesn’t give up. She cries. She begs. She screams.

The disciples response isn’t impressive either. They tell Jesus, “If you don’t get rid of her, she’s going to keep screaming at us.” Whether they want Jesus to give her what she wants in order to get rid of her or to just get rid of her without granting her request, their end goal is the same – for her to be gotten rid of. Their desire isn’t for her well-being, but their own peace. How noble...

That’s when Jesus breaks his silence. He says: “I was sent *only* to the lost sheep of the house of *Israel*.”

The implication is that because she’s a woman of a different nationality and that makes her unworthy of his attention. He’s saying, “My mission doesn’t include you.” It’s the polite way of saying, “Bug off.”

That's when she falls on her knees, looks up at him, and says, "Lord, help me."

If there is a harsher response in the New Testament than what Jesus says next, I don't know what it is. He looks down at the woman and he says, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

No matter how you try to explain it, it's impossible to get rid of the sting. Calling a woman a dog was an even bigger insult then than it is now. I have yet to find the contemporary paraphrase that has been brave enough to use the obvious translation.

Whatever the case, she doesn't get as flustered as I get trying to preach this story. She doesn't argue whether she's a "dog" or not. She doesn't argue whether Jesus' ministry should be for his own people *first* or not. She simply takes that that horrible insult and tries to turn into a familiar homey image of the family pet, who sits right under the lip of the table, hoping beyond hope that you'll accidentally let a little food drop to the floor: "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat crumbs that fall from the masters' table."

Even us lowly Gentiles are hungry for what you have.

Now, if she had a microphone, this is when she would have dropped it. Did you know that it's the only story in scripture where someone bests Jesus in a debate?

Was it her persistence? Was it her wit? Was it her *chutzpah* that caused the change in Jesus? It's unclear, but whatever it was, Jesus' mind is changed.

Before that moment, he wasn't going to waste even a single word on her, but now he not only heals her daughter, he praises her great faith. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed that very hour.

Thank God for the ending, or else this story might have no redeeming value. But even though it does get wrapped-up in a nice bow, it doesn't really make it that much more palatable, does it? I think that's because no matter how you cut it, Jesus does not act like the Jesus we expect in this story.

It's one thing when Jesus "punches up" — as in, goes after those in power — like the Pharisees or the scribes or even king Herod. When he says harsh things to folks like that, when he puts them in their place — that feels like a fair fight.

But where else in scripture do you see Jesus "punch down" — belittle someone who is already on the margins, say something cruel to somebody who is already suffering? That doesn't feel fair at all. It doesn't feel right. It just seems mean — which does not jive with the Jesus we know from scripture.

So what do we do with it?

Maybe a better question is to start by asking why Matthew would include it in the first place. It's not like Matthew *had* to include it. Both Matthew and Luke relied on Mark's gospel as the foundation for their own versions. Mark's gospel does include a version of this story. Luke chose *not* to include in his gospel, but Matthew did.

So why? For what purpose? To what end did?

The Church has traditionally tried to deal with this story in one of a handful of ways.

The easiest way has been to simply dismiss it as an *inauthentic* account. You've heard the phrase, "If it looks like a duck and sounds like a duck, then it must be a duck." Well, the folks who hold to his idea say, "If it *doesn't* look like a duck and it *doesn't* sound like a duck, it must *not* be a duck." In other words, this doesn't look like Jesus nor sound like Jesus, so it must not be Jesus.

Their theory, then, is that some ancient Jewish Christians who didn't want to include Gentiles in the mission of the church decided to make up a tall tale about how Jesus rejected the Gentiles, too. But then Mark and Matthew took that tall tale and "baptized" it, so to speak, so as to praise the Gentile woman's faith and justify her inclusion.

The second approach, which has probably been the most popular (and is probably the one you were taught in Sunday School), treats the story as absolutely *authentic*, but says that it was all just a *test*. Jesus wonders if she really has faith or not, and says to himself, "I know what I'll do — I'll test her by seeing how persistent she is and how many insults she's willing to endure? If she passes my arbitrary test then I'll heal her daughter."

That is what we call making the ends justify the means. The end result is good, and so everything Jesus put her through justifies his actions. The problem with that, of course, is that we really don't see Jesus treat anyone else in all of the gospels as cruelly as he does this woman. Test or no test, this don't feel right.

The third approach is like the second, in that it takes the story as *authentic* and understands it as a *test*, but it claims that the subject of the test is actually the disciples, who when Jesus is initially silent and then insulting, refuse to confront him on her behalf. Had they learned nothing from Jesus? Would they never get it? Why didn't they intervene and try to help this woman? Maybe Jesus was trying to expose their prejudices to them.

But, of course, the same problem exists. Do we think that Jesus would say it's okay to mistreat someone in order to make a point? No.

So what do we do with this story?

I'd like to suggest that maybe we take this story of Jesus at face value; that we read it like it is — and that *we learn* from this encounter *what Jesus learns* from it.

The problem really is that we don't like the idea of Jesus learning — or maybe it's the idea the Jesus still had things to learn. That idea butts up against our understanding of Jesus being perfect in all ways — all knowing, all seeing, all powerful. Jesus didn't learn. He is "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8).

It's not just a problem for us. In fact, it's been a problem for the church for a long time. Take a look at you bulletin cover (*see image below*). This is a medieval icon from the 1200s depicting Mary and her baby, Jesus. Do you notice anything strange about Jesus? Anything that seems peculiar? Anything funny about that baby Jesus?

The adult face? The fully-formed body, sitting up like a grown person? The receding hairline??

He's small like a baby, but with a grown man's face and head! And this icon isn't unique! If you were to Google, medieval icons of Mary with baby Jesus, you would find icon after icon after icon of a full grown woman Mary holding a baby Jesus that looks more like a miniature man than a baby.

Why is that?

Because it was what they *believed* — that Jesus was born into this world already grown, all-knowing, and ready to change the world. He didn't have to grow or learn. He was born fully-formed.

We aren't that different. We like the idea that Jesus was born all-knowing and ready to change the world. What we don't like is the idea that Jesus might just have also been changed by the world.

Before this moment, he thought his mission was "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But after he meets her, his horizons have been expanded. God's kingdom is suddenly bigger — bigger even than the border of Israel.

Maybe what this story is about isn't the Canaanite woman and her faith, but about how her great faith made Jesus question what he thought he already knew.

Maybe this story isn't about her daughter being healed, but about how through her Jesus came to understand that God's kingdom and God's mission are even bigger than he had first understood.

In John Drinkwater's play, *Abraham Lincoln*, a dialogue occurs between the President and a woman passionate for the northern cause in the Civil War. She asks the President for news of the war, and he replies, "There is news of a victory. They lost 2700 men and we lost 800. "

The woman was ecstatic, "How splendid!"

The President was obviously disturbed by her reaction. "Thirty-five hundred lives were lost..." But the woman interrupts, "Oh, you must not think like that, Mr. President. There were only 800 that mattered."

Lincoln's shoulders drooped. There were tears in his eyes. "Madam, the world is larger than your heart."

Maybe Matthew kept this story in his gospel, not because Jesus was testing the woman or testing the disciples, but because it was a story about when Jesus' own heart had to grow if he was to live into the fullness of God's kingdom.

And if his heart had to grow, then don't you think ours, too?

So who is it you would keep out? Where would you draw the boundary lines of who belongs and who doesn't?

Who?

If even Jesus can have a change of heart, then can't we too?

Amen.



Madonna and Child by Berlinghiero, 1230s, via The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York