

Sermon for August 19-20 – Patty Koplitz

This Gospel has always shocked me a bit when I read it. Well verses 21-28. To me it sounds like Jesus is rebuking this Canaanite woman. He is currently in Tyre and Sidon. He is not expecting a foreigner to approach him. Even though this is a foreign land to him and his disciples.

His reaction to the woman is expected by those around him. Particularly Matthew. Jesus explains that he is not called to minister to any others except the lost sheep of Israel, God's chosen people. But he is not addressing the woman as he says this. This is directed towards his disciples. A Canaanite woman would not be among God's chosen people. She represents an outsider, an enemy, a foreigner. At first he ignores her. He keeps silent. His disciples join in as they feel is appropriate. "Tell her to be quiet!".

As she begs on her knees in front of Jesus, she must look like the dog at the table begging for scraps. But she is displaying an appropriate position as one would a King. Jesus reacts the way a rabbi in that day and age would have reacted. One commentator wrote that "This is who Matthew saw Jesus as being. (Remember, we are hearing this story through the lens of Matthew.) Jesus has been sent to the house of Israel to be the authoritative interpreter of tradition." It sounds harsh to us. After all, he likens her to a dog.

The woman claims Jesus as Lord and Son of David. What a lovely statement of faith. It seems to me that she knows even better than the disciples, who Jesus truly is. She even brings attention to his lineage, his ancestry. Son of David. She knows who she is asking for help. She asks for mercy. She is fully aware of what he is capable of. He hears that declaration and exclaims that her faith is indeed great. He heals her daughter immediately. He has no request of the woman, no other deeds for her to first accomplish. He simply heals her daughter. She understands that Jesus is not just hope for Israel, but hope for the whole world. The disciples don't even know Jesus this well! They are still struggling with the idea of him as the Messiah. It's not until chapter 16 that Peter declares "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" after Jesus asks him, who do you say that I am?

He heals a foreigner's daughter. Jesus gives her value, importance. In Isaiah's reading for today, verse 6 claims, "and the foreigners who join

themselves to the Lord.” And then further in 8 it says “thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel.” One of the commenters J. Blake Couey explains that two classes of people who were previously excluded from the community are now welcomed into it: foreigners and eunuchs. God doesn’t wait for devout foreigners to find their way to the temple, God “will bring them to my holy mountain”, according to Isaiah. And then God promises to bring new people into the community. He goes on to say “Theologically, it reflects the persistent trajectory across scripture to expand the boundaries of God’s people in ever more inclusive ways.”

How does this woman know Jesus so well? Does she know Psalm, 67? “May God be merciful to us and bless us, may the light of God’s face shine upon us!?” Is she familiar with the verse in Isaiah 56:6, “and the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord”.

She could have been insulted with the silence from Jesus. And then following the statement about dogs, she could have gotten angry. I try to imagine hearing that from someone and I am not sure how I would react.

In the first part of the reading in Matthew, verses 10-20, Jesus is telling the crowd that what goes into the mouth doesn’t harm you. It’s not what you eat that makes you impure. But what comes out of the mouth. Those words that we use, they come from our hearts, that is what defiles us.

One of my favorite bible verses is from James. James 1:19, be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. I have a tendency to lose my filter when I am riled up. I know that the words I use don’t always glorify God. My family tends to see me in the best light. Especially my sons. I really love that. But they have all heard me spew out inappropriate things. I can only imagine what I might have wanted to say to Jesus if he likened me to a dog begging for scraps. Especially if I was seeking help for one of my kids. Don’t mess with the mama bear.

Power to this woman for being able to call him Lord and Son of David.

I think it’s important for us to remember that what comes out of our mouth is what causes hurt and pain for others. Because what comes out of our mouths, comes from our hearts. The harsh words we use are intended to hurt people. We do it intentionally. Unknowingly, maybe, but those words reside inside each of us.

Perhaps the real lesson of this story is to challenge us to imitate Jesus in being willing to extend the gospel to all people, starting with the ones who, for whatever the reason, we may see as unworthy. The outsider, the foreigner, the homeless, the people who are less than... Finish that however you would like. How do we live into that idea? We recently had a police officer come and talk to some of us about scams. Somehow the discussion came around to, how do we help those people begging on the streets? It made for a great conversation and the officer was very kind in his responses. How do we do it? I think one way is to make sure that there is room at the table. I learned this in bible study this week. Make sure that we welcome everyone to our table, to this table. Not just the ones that talk like us or look like us. I think that our Canaanite woman was asking for a place at this table.

What do we learn from this foreign woman? We see a more real version of Jesus in this story, that's for sure. Again through the lens of Matthew. We see a woman who trusts, who is faithful, she simply wants to be seen and save her daughter. Who are the foreigners among us? And what can we learn from them? My sister is not a believer in the way that I am, but often I learn plenty from her. I learn about trust and love and acceptance.

And when we go out into the world, we need to wear our best faces. We need to use our kindest words, our most loving words. We need to address others and each other with respect and humbleness. We will remember that even a lowly Canaanite woman was shown mercy and love by Jesus. She was an outsider, but because of her persistence, Jesus granted her her deepest desire. As we move in the world, how do we not welcome people to this place? I don't mean this church in particular, it could be that. But how do we show people how valuable they truly are? That's my question to you.