

Reflection for Fellowship@10

20.08. 2023

Text: Matthew 15:21-28

Title: Crossing the Line

Introduction

That annoying Canaanite woman is at it again and not even Jesus can catch a break. Every three years that annoying woman comes along to disturb us. The way the anonymous gospel storyteller that we call Matthew tells his story, this annoying woman exposes Jesus for the human being that he was and shatters our illusions of Jesus the god-like super-hero.

I know we could just look the other way. We could do what people, all too often do, when someone brushes off another human being with a racial slur; we could just pretend that we didn't hear it.

We could do what, according to the story, Jesus' followers wanted Jesus to do, when they urged him to: *"Please get rid of her! She keeps calling after us."* X2

Let us pray...

However hard we try, the behaviour of Jesus, in the gospel passage today, is definitely shocking and whatever we make of it we cannot just dismiss it or move past it. It is clear from the way that the story is told that Jesus was trying to ignore this annoying woman's incessant pleas. But she will not leave him alone.

And as much as I'd like to ignore her and everything she represents, she just won't give us a break. While we can be frightened away by Jesus' use of a harsh metaphor as he names the non-Jewish woman, we have to confront this honestly. Shortly after explaining to the crowd that *"it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."*

The way Jesus responds to the Canaanite woman pleading for help, in my opinion is cruel. His first response is that he simply ignores her.

Have you been ignored before? Do you remember how you felt?

Second, Jesus names her as someone who doesn't deserve his notice. While we let that sink in, let us spend a minute or two reminding ourselves of the context of the story.

New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg insisted that we should ask ourselves, *"Why it is that the gospel writers told the stories they told the way they told them?"*

First let's not forget that Jesus was a man of his time; a man who was raised in an environment where women were to be seen and not heard; a man who was raised to believe that his people were superior to other people, a man who wasn't about to be disturbed by the yapping of a woman who was when all was said and done, nothing more than a Canaanite.

Remember Jesus was, after all a rabbi, and a busy rabbi at that. According to the story, Jesus had just fed the 5,000 and walked on water? He was a rabbi who was in demand, the crowds couldn't get enough of him, Jesus had places to go and people to see. So who did this woman think she was?

Now the gospel of Matthew is written with the Jewish community in mind. This story is definitely told from a Jewish point of view, where God's faithfulness to the covenant with the Jewish community is most important. *"I was sent **only** to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."* (Matt 15:24)

Let's recap the story... A woman, who has been caregiving for her daughter – her daughter so sick that her mother says, "She is tormented by a demon"... A woman so desperate that

she resorts to begging... *“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”*

Initially Jesus refuses to speak to her and answer her... – the disciples chime in telling him to send her away... She’s not one of us! ***Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”*** (Matt. 15:23) – then to add insult to injury to this poor woman, he insults her... (did you hear him?) ***“It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”*** (Matt. 15:26)

Did I just hear Jesus call her one of the dogs? Are you shocked, surprised, and maybe even a bit confused or disappointed with Jesus? But did you notice that the disciples are not shocked or surprised with his response. Neither is the woman begging and pleading for Jesus to help. Why? Because they understand how their world works. No one expects Jesus to help her.

If they are shocked or surprised by anything it is that this woman has crossed the line... Hard lines had been drawn in the time of Jesus. And everyone knew you don’t cross certain lines. Jesus and the disciples knew that there were certain religious and ethnic lines you don’t cross.

Her problem you see is that she is not a Jew. She is not one of them. She is a Canaanite, with whom observant Jews of Jesus time had little contact. She comes from the coastal region of Syria where strange gods are worshipped and ritual laws of cleanliness are unknown. She is a Gentile... not one of the chosen ones of God. She is one of those dogs — unclean. Trash.

We know that the Jews had warnings about people like her from their Bible — the Hebrew Scriptures speaks clearly about the sinfulness and godlessness of the Canaanites. They remember how their ancestors were told to stay away from them when they entered the Promised Land. Jesus had warned his disciples to steer clear of them... reminding them that

their call of God was only to go to the lost sheep of Israel. We are called to take care of our own first. So, no one was shocked or surprised by Jesus' response and the reluctance to cross that hard line drawn by faith and culture.

There is an old saying you've heard... *"To err is human, but to forgive divine."* I like that. But may I offer another version. *"To be stuck in our ways of thinking is human... but to learn God's inclusive way is divine"*.

I think Matthew kept this story in his gospel because his people needed to hear it. He was writing to Jewish Christians. I bet more than once someone said to him, *"We're supposed to take care of Jews first — after all Jesus was sent to the Jews."*

Now that ought to put her in her place. Jesus was after all a Jewish rabbi, who did this Canaanite woman think she was? Bad enough that she is a woman, breaking all the rules of decorum. A woman speaking in public to a man like that, was simply scandalous. That's a line she shouldn't have crossed! If that's not bad enough, remember she's a Canaanite; a Canaanite.

Sure, the land of Israel may have been Canaan before it was Israel, but that was a long time ago. The Israelites had long since put what few Canaanites that were left in their place and this woman should have known better than to be so uppity. My goodness she is so annoying. A nasty woman! Those bloody Canaanites simply don't know how to behave in public and when to stop. They just persist, and persist, and persist. I mean throwing herself like that at Jesus' feet and pleading with him, "Help me, rabbi! Help me!" How could she demean herself like that? Where is her dignity? She had crossed too many lines! Why can't she just stay at the prescribed lines? Stop woman! Stop!

"True, Rabbi," she replied, "but even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from the table." Talk about nasty! The audacity of this woman. Using Jesus' words against him. Unbelievable!

However, the good news is that, when confronted by the reality of his privilege, granted to him by virtue of his gender, his race, his class, and his religion, Jesus was prepared to re-examine all his privileges, Jesus was able to see that this ever so annoying woman, with her incessant demands has a very good point.

“You may think we’re nothing but dogs, you may think you are entitled to call me a bitch, but even dogs are entitled to a few crumbs.”

I am glad that Jesus got there in the end. Sadly, it took this nasty, uppity woman to shame him into seeing the reality of his racism, his ethnocentric beliefs, to get him there, but Jesus got there in the end.

I believe Matthew tells the story to challenge the Jewish Christians and as it turns out, it challenges us too. What lines are we prepared to cross in order to bring God’s inclusive love to all?

I believe through this story Matthew wants us to see that even though we may think we know who needs to come first in our mission and ministry... even though we think we know who God loves more than others... even though we have drawn hard lines about where compassion and love should be shared... God has a way of moving those lines. And if we are going to follow Jesus — we are going to be open to God’s Spirit... we need to remain open to the people God is sending our way no matter who they are or what others may say of them.

Whether we are aware of it or not we live by many unspoken rules and conventions and jealously guard our place in society. Yet this passage reminds us that just like Jesus we are called to enter new territory and cross lines so that we might meet with outsiders and grant them not just a crumb, but a place at the table. If we are to follow Jesus, we too must step beyond our comfort zone and prepare to cross the lines that we have and open

ourselves to new ways of being in the world. When confronted by the reality of his boundaries, of his cultural, ethnic, religious lines Jesus broke all the rules and a child was healed.

Do we have the faith to follow Jesus beyond our prescribed lines, or boundaries, or our conscious and unconscious biases so that healing can happen, right here and right now?

Let go!

Step out!

Are you ready to hear a few challenging suggestions?

Are you ready?

Look a Canaanite in the eye. With empathic eyes,
knock on a strange door, ask an outsider what his or her life is like, trespass an old boundary, enter a new relationship, push a limit, take a risk, give up playing safe!

You have nothing to lose but your life the way it has been, and there is lots more life where that came from.

And if you get scared, which you will, and if you get mad, which you probably will too, remember today's story!

If we are serious about following Jesus, step over the lines we have drawn for ourselves, not because we have to and not because we ought to or even because we want to, but because we know that it is God own self who waits for us on the other side of the line.

Let it be so, dear friends, let it be so.