



“Opening the House”

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Matthew 15:10-28 (NRSV):

21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." 23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." 24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." 26 He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." 27 She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." 28 Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Sermon:

What is wrong with Jesus?

Is he really that much of a jerk?

How can he call that woman a dog?

How can he say such nationalistic, sectarian stuff, “sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” ...what is that all about!?

Has he somehow forgotten the words of the prophet Isaiah; that we heard this very morning in our call to worship? Words about God’s expansive welcome to the outcast and the foreigner?

What shall we think of this moment in his ministry? There are a number of things that stand out to me:

1. We often minimize the fact that Jesus was HUMAN. He got tired, he got cranky, he got into arguments and felt worn out with the fighting. This is exactly where we find him in this reading...worn out and angry from arguing with the Pharisees about the nature of true worship, and proper behavior before God; in the temple, and in the lives of faithful Jews. Growing up, I read the word "Pharisee" with prejudice, labeling them all the "bad guys" to Jesus's "good guy". I know better now. I know that Jesus was probably educated by Pharisees, that some of his messages are in fact from the teachings of various rabbis in the Pharisee tradition. The Pharisees were Jesus' friends and mentors. And you have the worst fights and the biggest disagreements, with people you really care about. I have my most tense disagreements with people who matter to me. If it is a foolish stranger, I can just walk away. I don't usually waste my time on people I don't know. Jesus has been arguing with people he cares about, arguing about the faith of Yahweh that animates him, and his friends the Pharisees. It is not unlike the arguments I have had over the years with conservative Roman Catholic family members who see my ordination as invalid, and a farce. Or the theological disagreements I have again and again about LGBTQIA rights and dignity as the precious children of God. Can you agree with me, when I say, these are the hardest fights, and the most emotionally exhausting? I believe this is where we enter the story today...with Jesus worn out from the fighting.
2. Jesus is devoted to his people. His heart breaks for them; for their desperate poverty, their oppression, their despair. He is doing all he can to feed them (5,000 at a time, remember last week?) and heal them of their sicknesses and diseases. Day in and day out. Last week, he took a break for one night of peace and quiet. Now, just a little while later, he already has had blistering arguments with his religious colleagues. That stuff is exhausting.
3. Like many a good organizer, Jesus is working locally, making change, training leadership, facing off with the powers that be, on the local level. But this woman is no local. She is indeed a part of the people who were ancient enemies of the Jews, the Canaanites. Tyre and Sidon are still foreigner's cities. This woman is one of them, and loud, and abrasive. The disciples say she is shouting at them. Jesus is ignoring her, but she isn't done...no sir, she gets in his way and decides to argue with him. One more argument! I can practically feel Jesus fuming! He is just SoDoneWithArguingToday! So, he says his most cutting words. First he cut at the

Pharisees, now he curtly dismisses this desperate mother in her desperate need.
Ouch!

4. But now the gospel story shifts...it isn't about Jesus at all, any more. Now it is about the power of mother-love, it is about the desperate courage of those who dare, it is all about demanding what God promises and not letting anyone stop you from receiving what you know God gives. Down through the ages, men have tried to tell women what they deserve and don't deserve, what to do and what they cannot do. The powerful have tried to tell the powerless that they were destined for that state of misery forever. This woman stands in the long, long line of people who have stood up, even when they are reviled, and said, NO, I don't agree!
5. I am nobody's baggage, I am nobody's chattel. I am nobody's slave. I am nobody's expendable worker at the grocery store, expendable soldier in a meaningless war, expendable undocumented farm laborer picking your food, expendable child in a cage at the border, or expendable children in a crowded classroom in Florida, children who will get sick, and some of whom will die. No; that Canaanite woman says, speaking for all of us, and for all times: I have worth. I have dignity. I am beloved of God. I will receive God's blessing. I will receive God's healing. I will receive life and hope and love, dignity and justice! This is God's word, and God's words are life!
6. Lastly, there is this: Jesus, you are God's child, and God's messenger of love. But so is that woman! HER faith is GREAT, you acknowledged it! She is the messenger of God to YOU, to open the doors of the house of your heart...wider, wider, wider.

SHE is the witness of the prophet Isaiah; the foreigner and the outcast will be welcomed by God Almighty, welcomed into the wide open house of God. SHE heals your tired and angry wounds with her truth and her power...speaking up as God's own daughter. You had forgotten, she reminded you, forcefully!

Good people of God, listen to the voices that stand, and demand we share the blessings of God...listen to the sisters and brothers of that Canaanite woman long ago, listen to Black Lives, to Indigenous peoples, to women, and refugees and immigrants...and we will hear, the great good news of God's wide open house, with a welcome big enough for all.

Alleluia.

Amen.