

“Did Jesus Really Say That?”

Matthew 15:21-28

August 20, 2017

[The woman] came and knelt before Jesus, saying, “Lord, help me.”

*Jesus answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food
and throw it to the dogs.” Matthew 15:25-26*

Wow! Did Jesus really say that? This poor woman begging for help and Jesus responds, *“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”* What?

Yes, well, this is one of those sayings of Jesus that one might wish he had never said! If, in fact, he ever did say this.

It’s a problem passage because, first of all, Jesus simply ignores this poor woman who has come in desperate need of help for her child. She’s not asking *anything* for herself, but for her little girl who is being tormented!

At first, Jesus just ignores her! Then, it would appear that he is uncharacteristically harsh and uncaring toward her, even insulting and mean-spirited!

Could Jesus really have called her a “dog” as though he were addressing some sub-human creature? What are we supposed to make of this?

It’s a tough passage, but it also presents us with an opportunity to consider how we go about interpreting the Scripture.

As for Jesus’ comments to the Canaanite woman, there are no less than four common views:

1. Some commentators think that, in fact, Jesus did *not* say this. They suggest that this is an apocryphal story made up by those Jews who were opposed to the mission to the Gentiles. They added this later to suit their own purposes. Maybe.
2. Others would have us believe that what Jesus said wasn’t really all that bad because the Greek word in this text used for “dog” was that affectionately used for a pet dog. Okay, for dog lovers, maybe so. Personally, I think that explanation is just stupid.
3. A third interpretation views this as a test of the woman’s faith which she passed with her persistence and, consequently, had her plea answered with her daughter’s instantaneous healing. Could be, I suppose. But, that’s a long reach.
4. Lastly, maybe it happened just as Matthew reports it, in which case Jesus acted just as any man of his day might be expected to act toward a Gentile woman who should have known better than to talk to him in the first place!

That doesn't make the fact that he referred to her as a "dog" any less *unkind* or any less *uncharacteristic* of Jesus.

And maybe there are elements of truth in all of these interpretations, or, maybe not.

And that, quite rightly, brings us to ask some questions about how we interpret biblical passages. This story of the Canaanite woman helps us focus on some things we need to know about biblical interpretation.

Now, think about the fact that this was a very old story! This story was being "remembered" by the writer of Matthew (or, actually Mark, since he wrote it down first) more than a half-century after it occurred. That is to say, the story had been told and retold through 2 or 3 generations, and stories tend to change and be embellished with the retelling.

It's like a game we play at youth events. And maybe have you have played it, too, where you sit in a circle and the leader whispers a short few sentences into the ear of the person next to her and so on around the circle. Usually what comes out at the end is nothing like the original. This is a game we have to play with the Scriptures all the time.

- 1) In this passage from Matthew there does appear to be some evidence of "redaction" which means someone went back and wrote things in that were not originally there in order to advance their own agenda. Remember, we have no original manuscripts. Not a shred!
- 2) That was a very different culture so long ago, so our interpretation of Jesus' words as harsh or mean-spirited may be entirely wrong.
- 3) Whether or not this was a test of the woman's faith only Jesus knows! We can't always know exactly what he meant.

But there is another principle of biblical interpretation that is even more important than any of these. It is that, we believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God, not dictated word for word, but a living Word; and, that this Word is, in fact...the person of Jesus Christ himself, the "Word made flesh."

The words are inspired because THE Word (capital "W") inspires them, makes them come alive, gives them meaning and allows these words to convey truth to us. So, in a sense, we do have access to the original, not the manuscripts, but, even better, to the Person who inspires them! That's >inspires<, not >inspired>; the inspiration is a continuing manifestation of God's presence with us even now!

When we come to a passage of Scripture, we do so with the all the *tools of biblical criticism*. We look at the context of the passage, the historical and cultural situation, the language be it Greek or Hebrew.

But we also come with hearts and minds open to the possibility that God's Word might just be doing a new thing in us! This is why Bible study, far from being boring or dull, can be a tremendously exciting and inspiring endeavor!

It is not a matter of learning only what others have said about the passage, but of learning what God may be saying to us, here and now, through the passage!

So, what might we learn today in regard to this story of the Canaanite woman? How might the Scripture inspire us this morning?

What strikes me upon this reading of the passage is not Jesus' comment about dogs, which his disciples would have taken as not particularly surprising, but his affirmation of the woman's faith which they would have taken as very surprising!

"Woman, *great* is your faith." Why is that surprising? Well, the disciples must have been *stunned* that Jesus would even speak to a Canaanite woman, and more, that he would attribute any "faith" at all to a Gentile and a woman at that, and even more that he would praise her faith as being *great!* The disciples were stunned because he had just gotten through castigating his own disciple, Peter, when he nearly drowned, as a man of *little* faith.

And then he turns to this Gentile, this "dog," and praises *her* faith?

He calls the woman a "dog" and says it isn't fair that she should get the children's bread (meaning, the *Children of Israel, the disciples' bread*), just what the disciples would have expected and been pleased to hear. But then he praises the woman's faith! That was something they definitely would *not* have expected to hear!

I think Jesus was telling his disciples, (and that includes you and me) this kingdom is open to everyone, even the least of God's children and here kneels one of them before you!

What is so striking and surprising about the story is how Jesus still again turns the expectations of his disciples on their ear! The chapter continues with the disciples having nothing more to say because Jesus' words struck them speechless!

Now, we live in a day and time when not very many people seem to be struck speechless by the words of Jesus. Would that there were more! In fact, there are seemingly endless speeches from people who claim to know exactly what the Scripture says on a great variety of controversial subjects including race, evolution, abortion, salvation, judgment, homosexuality, transgendering, war, people of other faiths, even immigrants. And, of course, our all-time favorite, the end of the world!

And, without a doubt most of the people making the speeches are sincere people who are seeking the truth from the Scripture, So, who knows, some of them may be right; but they can't all be right since in so many cases their conclusions are totally contradictory!

And then there are the liars who hurl biblical quotations like butcher knives fully intending to destroy the defenseless. A case in point are some of the violent demonstrators last week in Charlottesville: The Christian Knights of the Klu Klux Klan. Neo-Nazis some of whom actually believe they are followers of Jesus, just as did their predecessors in Nazi Germany.

So, where does that leave you and me? *It leaves us to struggle with the Scripture for ourselves*, not only to listen to the speeches (or, dare we say “sermons”) of others who believe they know the truth of what the Scripture says.

The truth is that the truth *is here* for all of us to discover in the words of Scripture. And, by the way, not just the New Testament. Martin Luther said we should read the Old Testament looking for Jesus in every verse!

So, you have the Book, right? (It’s around there someplace! If you don’t remember where it is, take one of those red ones from under the pew). And, you can hide it on the way out so everyone doesn’t know you can’t find your dusty Bible at home.

But more, *you know The Word* (capital “W”), the Person of the Book, Jesus Christ, who participates with us in the ongoing revelation of the truth of God, who is, Jesus, in fact, himself, the Truth!

So, I urge you to read the Book! Read it as though it was written just for you; *it was!*

And read it *with the expectation* that you will *be surprised*, not only by the words, but by The Word, the living Word, Jesus Christ!

You want to know the truth? Don’t ask, “What is the truth.” Ask, “Who is the truth?” It is Jesus who is the truth and it is Jesus from whom the truth comes!

Good friends, read the Book!!