

As a teenager, I started reading straight through the Gospels for the first time and I can still recall very clearly where I was and how I felt when I first came across the passage we just read in Matthew about the Syrophenician woman who asks Jesus to heal her daughter of a demon. I was taken aback by Jesus' response to her request, which sounded so out of character for Jesus. He responds to her plea, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." I had to re-read this passage several times just to make sure I had read it correctly. It's been a passage of interest to me ever since.

But what exactly is going on here? First, we must point out that in that culture women were never to initiate conversations with men, so right away there is the breaking of an important tradition and cultural norm in this passage. She is also not Jewish- she is identified as a Canaanite, a Gentile, and Gentiles were considered unclean sinners in Jewish tradition. She seems to be aware of this fact because she approaches Jesus with reverence and submission by bowing down at his feet. But again, we see that she isn't going to let tradition stand in her way: her daughter is sick and she believes Jesus can heal her: this is a mother's love taking radical action.

This story brought to mind a news story about a man who went into a local credit union and demanded money. He was given around \$8000 but was later arrested. He explained that he was desperate and trying to get money to pay for his 1-year old daughter's cancer treatments. His daughter was indeed suffering from retinoblastoma and the insurance company had stopped paying for her chemotherapy. In his desperation, he says he made the decision to try to steal the money to keep her treatments going. While it certainly doesn't not make his actions moral, the feeling of utter desperation looms in the background of both of these events: it is hard to know what one may be capable of when one's child's life is on the line. I remember being in the ER with my son when he was only 10 months old and struggling for breath- I became uncharacteristically hysterical with loud demands for a nurse or doctor to see him that instant when they seemed to be distracted in conversation.

Maybe this woman surprised herself with the boldness in which she demanded Jesus' help for her daughter. However, we read that the mother's request is initially rebuffed by Jesus. Some have suggested that Jesus was tired and that his priority and focus was simply on the disciples and the Jewish people, those whom he refers to as "children." Recall that St. Paul wrote: "the power

of God for salvation to everyone who has faith" came "to the Jew first and then also to the Greek." Was this in Jesus' mind when he responded to her?

Going deeper, we also know that Jewish writers sometimes referred to Gentiles as "dogs." This is the part of the passage that is most challenging: Jesus seems to be responding to her so dismissively with a response straight out of a highly questionable tradition (to say the least). Might he, however, as he often did, have been testing her and her motives here? Might Jesus have been shining a light on what was essentially a racist term in order to ultimately challenge it by giving the woman the blessing she desired? Jesus says to her, "it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The woman responds saying maybe she isn't as deserving as the children, but replies cleverly, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Ah! She has a great point there, doesn't she? Every dog owner knows this is true...we might feed ourselves first but we would never neglect the beloved family dog.

The woman's statement is like the winning phrase in a debate. I have often mused that perhaps Jesus gave her this platform in order to allow her to make her winning case. And most of us, when confronted with a superior argument, will dig our heels in even deeper and resist. We humans don't like to give up any ground or admit we're wrong. And here is where Jesus is so different: because Jesus has clearly allowed this woman to one-up him. His response to her is delightful: he says to her, "Woman, great is your faith!" He's never said that about any of his disciples. And then he says, "Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter is healed instantly.

Jesus rewards this woman's faith, insight, persistence and humility and ultimately shines a spotlight on her (who is notably both a woman and of a "despised" race) as someone not only worthy of conversation with him but of praise and of God's blessing in the form of a miracle. In doing this, Jesus is challenging both the racism and sexism that is so rampant in his tradition and culture. Jesus gives voice to the racist tradition but then undermines it entirely and upholds the Gentile woman as the hero of the story, an example to all of someone of faith, worthy of God's greatest blessings.

Now: What does this story say to us today as Americans in the 21st century? Events like that in Charlottesville this past week when a car ploughed through a crowd of counter-protestors killing and injuring so many reminds us that we, as a nation, are still embedded in the sins of

our own narrow and bigoted traditions. As some have called it, “America’s original sin” of racism. And it’s not just “those people out there” that are the problem. We as a people, no less than the culture of Jesus’ day, have erected boundaries between ourselves that enable things like racism to continue. We do this as individuals, we do this in our religious groups and we do this in our wider social and cultural norms as well – norms that many of us simply take for granted. When the problem does not appear to impact us directly, it’s easy to turn a blind or uncaring eye. What we forget is that it does ultimately impact all of us.

Something that needs saying, because many white supremacist groups are employing Christian symbolism into their hate-filled cause, is that white supremacy and racism of any kind are completely incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ or for those who claim to follow him. And so we’re called to pray and ask God to show us if we might be harboring racism in our own hearts in any way, especially when so many of us, myself included, are passive beneficiaries of the racism that exists in our culture...and then we’re called to repent of it and seek forgiveness for it.

We also have to look at the church– because churches can either be places that challenge sin in all its forms or they can become places where sin is tolerated or not discussed and become part of the problem...just as the church did in Nazi Germany. The Rev. Scott Gun wrote in his Forward Movement meditation this week the following questions for churches to ask: “How has my church stood with--or failed to stand with--those who are the victims of racism, hatred, and fear? Has my church benefitted from white supremacy, and, if so, what must we do to repent?” And our new interim bishop, Bishop Katherine Jefferts-Schori wrote in a letter to our Diocese this week, “I urge us as a diocese to confront the evil of thinking some are more equal than others--in our own hearts, in our own actions and those of others, and in the social and legal structures of our communities and nation. None of us will ever be truly free until all are free.”

This is hard to do though, I know. Years ago as a graduate student I was actively involved in a ministry to homeless youth in Washington. One day I was sitting with a group of homeless kids on the street corner as I sought to minister to them. I was dressed cleanly but very casually and, looking younger than I was, I was mistaken by the police as a homeless youth when they came to clear the group out after local store owners had complained about our presence on the sidewalk. It struck me that even though I had allowed myself to

break the boundary of keeping my distance from this group of people whom society deemed as outcasts, I was still extremely startled by the prospect of being mistaken as one of them! I realized then and there that there was a wall up in my heart between myself and these kids. I saw myself as above and superior to them and didn’t want to be identified with them. And that knowledge stung.

Truthfully, it’s not just in ancient Israel- certain people are still considered “unclean” in our society today as we try to keep our distance and keep clear walls between us. Yet our Lord openly associated with all the sinners and outcasts of his day and he himself was accused of being “one of them” by the religious leaders. He also openly demonstrated the worth and dignity of every human being in his actions...from women to Gentiles and people of other races to the poorest of the poor. This is our example and should be our aspiration as his followers.

The prohibition Jesus was confronting in this story was ultimately revealed for what it truly was: a barrier erected by humans that separates us from one another and from God by refusing to honor the dignity and worth of all people. We all need to confess that we have failed-by what we have done and left undone- to do the work necessary to bring the walls erected between us down that have helped to maintain the racism that exists in our culture here and now at this moment in history. May God grant us the grace to truly live out our faith not just with our lips but with our lives.

AMEN.