

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 11th Sunday After Pentecost, August 20, 2017

Persistence Pays
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Matthew 15:21-28

Today's short scripture passage presents a quandary for any pastor. It depicts a harsh side of Jesus, a very harsh side. It isn't Christ like at all. Quite the contrary. This is one of those Biblical passages that many pastors avoid like the plague.

Barbara Brown Taylor ⁽¹⁾ said, *"This passage from Matthew describes one of those difficult moments in Jesus' life that we might skip altogether if the lectionary did not direct us to deal with it. What makes it so difficult is how harsh Jesus sounds, how harsh and downright rude. First he refuses to answer a woman pleading for his help, then he denies that he has anything to offer 'her kind', and finally he likens her to a dog before the sheer force of her faith changes something in him and he decides to answer her prayer after all."*

What was going on? Why did Jesus react like this? Theologians have speculated about this for generations and are not sure at all. There is no consensus.

It helps to understand that Matthew's gospel is written from a Jewish point of view and that the writing may have been biased in that direction. But those who read it today are generally non-Jews and look at it differently.

In Matthew 10:5-6 Jesus instructs the twelve saying, *"Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel."* Why just Israel? Why not elsewhere?

To understand you need to remember that this was before the crucifixion and resurrection and, except for the Centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant (who might have been Jewish) the Canaanite woman, the Samaritan leper, and the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus had little contact with Gentiles.

Jesus clearly considered his mission on earth to be the Israelites. Gentiles could be reached later after the resurrection, as indeed happened.

Jesus, of course, was harsh with the Jewish religious authorities, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Scribes for reasons we well understand but generally not with anyone else.

Clearly the writer of the Gospel of Matthew *“wants to make absolutely clear that God has not abandoned the Jews, God’s faithfulness to the covenant remains, and Jesus’ ministry is first and foremost to Israel. There is not equivocating on that point. Only after the crucifixion and resurrection is the door thrown open to the non-Jewish world.”* ⁽²⁾

The Canaanite woman is an outsider. She is not a Jew, but she is persistent. She knows who Jesus is and she is desperate for help.

Surprisingly she says to Jesus, *“Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me.”* Lord? Son of David? A Gentile addressing Jesus this way is startling. She is addressing him in a Messianic way, something that even the apostles and Jews had not done up to this point in time.

We can speculate as to why the woman used these titles for Jesus. Was she the first person to confess Jesus as the Messiah, a foreigner, a non-Jew? Jesus’ own people in Nazareth rejected the idea that he might be the Messiah, as did others in Israel. Barbara Brown Taylor ⁽¹⁾ said, *“Everywhere Jesus turns he finds need --- need and people who want what he can do for them but who remain blind to who he is.”*

But this Canaanite woman was not blind. She calls him Lord and Son of David. These are titles for the Messiah.

But Jesus stands firm and tries to shut her out saying, *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel”* but she persists in begging him for help.

Jesus responds, *“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”* That was an incredible insult to the woman. It was not a term of endearment in any way. The Jews often referred to Gentiles as dogs, people who were sub-human and here Jesus does the same.

But the woman who was desperate responds, *“Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.”*

Her persistence and her response break down Jesus’ resistance and he replies, *“Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.”* Her daughter was healed instantly.

Our Daily Bread ⁽³⁾ commented that, *“This desperate woman came to Jesus with her need because she believed that he could help her. She cried out to him even though everything and everybody seemed to be against her --- race, religious*

background, gender, the disciples, Satan, and seemingly even Jesus. Despite all of these obstacles, she did not give up. With bold persistence, she pushed her way through the corridors of difficulty, desperate need, and rejection”

As a pastor, I have often heard people say, “Everything happens for a reason.” They don’t. They happen for no other reason that we are human.

I recently read an article by Christine Suhan ⁽⁴⁾ which admonished Christians to stop saying that everything happens for a reason. She said “... *human beings are not exempt from the human experience. And struggle is an intimate part of the human experience ... We all struggle. We all suffer. We all experience pain, heartache and loss ... God’s will is not an event that happens to us, it’s how we respond to what happens.*”

The Canaanite woman’s daughter apparently had mental illness and the woman’s response was to seek out Jesus.

That is good advice for all of us. When you encounter difficulties in life remember that “*Not everything happens for a reason. But in everything that happens ... God can use our pain for greater good if we choose to let Him in ... We have to choose to give purpose and meaning to*” the difficulties of life.

Amen.

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Seeds of Heaven,” Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2004
2. Walter Bruggemann, et al, Texts for Preaching – Year A, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1995
3. Our Daily Bread 60-Day Introductory Edition, RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI, 2010
4. Christine Suhan, <http://faithit.com/christine-suhan-christians-stop-saying-everything-happens-reason/>

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011