

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
August 17, 2008
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 15:10-28

Surprise!

With our text for today, we begin moving into the second half of Jesus' ministry as recorded by Matthew. The Gospel of Matthew contains 28 chapters and today's lesson from chapter 15 stands almost literally at the center, right on the cusp of the second half of Jesus' ministry. And so we have to ask why. Why would this interaction, this on-the-surface rather awful story, frankly, about Jesus and the Canaanite woman stand nearly at the center of Matthew's Gospel?

In past treatments of this text, I have always focused on the conversation between Jesus and the unnamed Canaanite woman. I have zeroed in on my conviction that in this story, Jesus, who is both our divine Savior and our human brother, learns something about his own call through this interaction with the woman. This text paints the picture of this Canaanite woman serving as Jesus' teacher regarding the expansion of his call and ministry.

We read the exchange between them just a few moments ago. Jesus tells her that he is sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel and that he cannot very well take the children's food of salvation and throw it to the outsider dogs. But she does not flinch. "Yes, Lord," the woman responds, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." In other words, "Yes Lord, you are called first to the people of Israel, but we Gentiles also need your salvation." In past sermons on this story, this interaction between Jesus and the woman has always been my focus.

But I want us to look at this text differently today. And the wonderful thing about our tradition is that we can do just that. When we Presbyterians speak of the Bible as inspired, one thing we mean is that we believe God's Spirit continues to speak through these ancient words in different ways, in different times. Scripture can be like a prism that reflects the sunlight in a variety of colors, and what you see depends on where you stand. So today, I invite you to come and stand with me in a different place so we might see a different color in the text. Let us view this story from the prism of parableⁱ.

I know that it sounds odd at first—to think of this concrete story as a parable—but stick with me for a moment. Because if you back up in the Gospel of Matthew to chapter 13, you see that parables are all over the place. Jesus loved to teach with parables-- stories from everyday life that reveal some deep truth. And the deep truth Jesus always sought to reveal was the truth about God's kingdom, God's household, what the world looks like through God's eyes and what it will one day be, completely.

You have heard some of these parables this summer: The parable of the Sower. The parable of the weeds and the wheat. The parable of the mustard seed. And those are just a few of the 16 parables that sprout up in Matthew's gospel. Clearly, parables were Jesus' favorite way to teach about his ministry and his purpose. But, just as clearly, we notice that parables were not the disciples' favorite way to learn. They were constantly scratching their heads, saying things like,

“surely he is not comparing us to a bunch of weeds, right? Or a bunch of fish, or tardy hired hands, or any of those other weird illustrations he uses.”

Peter would just come right out and complain to Jesus. “Jesus, explain this stuff to us,” he would demand. But they did not always like the explanations Jesus gave, nor did they always understand. Parables are tricky and messy and call all kinds of things into question. Sometimes, in Jesus’ parables, we see things about God that we had not seen before. And sometimes, in Jesus’ parables, we see things about ourselves that we had not seen before, and usually, would rather have **not** seen ever.

And so, given Jesus’ penchant for parables and Matthew’s love of recording them, I cannot help but wonder about today’s story. I cannot help but wonder if part of what Jesus was doing was being a living parable. I cannot help but wonder if he was purposefully taking some of his teachings and showing what they looked like with flesh and blood. And specifically, in this story between Jesus and the woman, the teachings were about boundaries and faithfulness, about purity laws and identity.

Jesus had been talking with Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem. You heard the tail end of the conversation in verses 10-20. The religious leaders had come to Jesus to complain about the disciples. They were upset because the disciples had eaten without washing their hands. Now, for us, that might be an issue because of hygiene. But for the faithful Jews of that time, it was about much, much more than simply hygiene.

In the Israelites’ history, the washing of hands was required of priests to remove defilement before entering the tent of meeting. But through the years, hand washing had been expanded to include not just temple priests, but the whole people of Israel; and not just before worship, but also before meals and other every day actions¹¹. You washed your hands just in case you had come in contact with something or someone considered unclean. The ritual was about boundaries. It was about faithfulness. It was about purity. It was about identity.

And yet, Jesus’ disciples had not followed the ritual. So from the perspective of the religious leaders, Jesus’ disciples, and therefore, Jesus, had no regard for the law of God; no regard for the traditions of their faith; maybe even no real love for God, period. This was serious business. And Jesus knew it was serious business. And so, after questioning both the religious leaders’ motives and character, he got to the real heart of the matter. For the dispute was not really about washing hands. The dispute was really about what makes a person clean or unclean, fit or unfit to be in the presence of God.

Was it something external like hand washing, or was it something else? Jesus announced it was something else. The religious authorities had it backwards. It was not something external, something going in that defiled a person. It was not tribe or gender or station in life—none of those external boundaries. Jesus claimed it was what came out of the mouth that signaled if someone was clean or unclean, fit or unfit for God’s presence. For what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, Jesus taught. An evil heart leads to evil deeds. And you can wash your hands from here to eternity, but nothing will change about that.

Jesus took these traditions in which the disciples had been raised, in which he had been raised, and he changed them around. He wanted to make sure the disciples knew they could not be tainted by anything or anyone out there, anything external. And that teaching was a pretty radical change for their lives. The boundaries between clean and unclean were firmly in place. It mattered greatly if you were Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free. Boundaries were firmly in place. It was about faithfulness. It was about purity. It was about identity.

And then, I think the living parable enters the picture. Right after telling the disciples that nothing external could make them fit or unfit for God, Jesus leads all of them out of Jewish territory into Gentile territory. He walks them right into a rural area controlled by the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon. The area was full of ethnic and religious conflict, with political tension thrown in. It was anything but safe and comfortable space for the disciples. The alarm bells with which they had been raised must have been ringing in their heads – don't touch, unclean; don't touch, unclean. And as soon as they arrived, the Canaanite woman appeared. She is not named in the story. We just know her by what she was not. We know her as **not** Jewish, **not** male, **not** rich, **not** clean, and frankly, **not** included thus far in Jesus' ministry. And yet, there she was, crying out for the sake of her daughter.

Again, let's look at this story through the prism of parable. Parables are stories from everyday life that reveal deep truth about God's kingdom, God's household. So what do we see here from which we might glean deep truth? We see Jesus way out beyond the boundaries of what is safe and comfortable, way out beyond what has always been acceptable in his tradition. We see the disciples standing with him. They are out toward Tyre and Sidon, a place full of people with dirty hands. A place full of people who the disciples only knew by what they were not, which is that they were not a part of them.

And then, we see this pushy woman who represents all of "those people" trying to get to their Jesus. We see the disciples begging Jesus to send her away from them. She would not leave them alone. She kept shouting after them. And they were frustrated because she was not supposed to be with them in the first place. She did not belong with them. She was "other." And it was all about boundaries. It was all about faithfulness. It was all about purity. It was all about identity. When we look at this story as parable, we see that the woman was simply defined by who she was not, and she was not one of them. Or rather, she was not, is not, one of us.

She is not one of us. If we are going to look at this story as parable, then we need to use first person plural language here because the disciples stand in for us, the church, the group of Jesus' followers. And so, we also have to ask about the picture of the church in this story. "Send her away for she keeps shouting after us," the church yells. It seems to me that in this parable, the truth revealed about the church is that we are sometimes those people on the inside who try to protect Jesus from being bothered by people on the outsideⁱⁱⁱ, by those who are defined by what they are not, which is not like us.

And, seeing how Jesus responds to her, it looks like we are doing the right thing—trying to protect Jesus from those who are "other," the ones with dirty hands and fuzzy boundaries and persistent need. He ignores her. Then he speaks past her. And then, he insults her. Clearly, Jesus needs our protection.

And yet, you cannot help but wonder if part of the reason he says what he says is for our benefit. To make us think about it. To make us wrestle with it. He had just taught us that it is nothing external that makes one clean or unclean, fit or unfit to be in the presence of God. He had just taught us that all of those boundaries we thought were so firmly planted were actually rather porous, that our identity and faithfulness did not rest on distinctions or differences that keep us separate from others.

All of that teaching had just happened. And then, this unnamed woman, this person primarily known as simply not one of us, kneels at his feet, just like the Magi did when he was a baby. She falls down in worship and in need, claiming him as Lord and Son of David, testifying in faith that he has the power to heal her daughter. *And I think we have to wonder if Jesus was waiting for his disciples, for us, to get the point.* If Jesus was waiting for one of us, his disciples, to step up and say “Jesus, you’ve got to do it. You’ve got to enlarge your mission, your call. She, too, is one of us. She, too, is one of yours. After what you have just said, you have to embrace her, Jesus, and heal her daughter. The Gentiles also need your salvation.”

The fact that this story happens immediately after Jesus’ redefinition of purity and faithfulness makes me wonder if Jesus was just waiting for his disciples to finally put into practice what he had just preached. If Jesus was just waiting for his disciples to see that his mission did indeed begin with the House of Israel, with the insiders, but that it did not stop there, in the lovely peach walls of the sanctuary. That he was also called to embrace all those formerly known as outsiders, known as **not** us, but, because of Jesus Christ, who were now to be known as family, as part of the body.

You just have to wonder if Jesus was waiting for the disciples to finally see this deep truth about who he was, this deep truth about who they were called to be as his church: as people who walked through external boundaries; as people who looked at hearts instead of hands; as people who were constantly allowing God to reform them and change their understanding about what it means to be faithful; as people who were not too scared to see new colors and new angles in God’s Living Word of Scripture than only the ones they had seen growing up.

I read this story and I just have to wonder if Jesus was being a living parable of what he taught. For it is quite the lesson, isn’t it. It’s a real zinger for all of us who think we’ve got it figured out, boundaries firmly in place about what makes a person fit or unfit for God, all to protect our Jesus and ourselves.

ⁱ Willimon, Will. I am very indebted to Bishop Willimon for a sermon he preached on this text at Duke in August of 1999. He is the one who first mentioned the woman as living parable. I have changed his angle, but his insight of the parable has been invaluable. His sermon is entitled “Jesus Beyond the Boundary.”

ⁱⁱ This historical information about purity and washing is found in [A Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels](#), written by Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ Willimon.