

Matthew 15: 21-28
(Genesis 45: 1-15)

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St Aidan's/Wesley

One of basic tenets of Christian theology is stated in the book of Hebrews where Jesus is described as “one who in every respect was tempted as we are, yet without sin.” [Heb. 4.15] Without sin? Well, I think the author of Hebrews didn't know the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, then, because very clearly in this story we see and hear Jesus being blatantly racist and sexist and quite horribly abusive to a particularly vulnerable person--and I definitely call that sin. Fortunately, he also repents.

I remember an incident early in my ministry when I was Interim Minister of a big Presbyterian church in Newcastle. This was a rather grand church setting, capable of seating several hundred people, huge stained glass windows all around, the high pulpit reached by a spiral staircase and fitted with a box for me to stand on so I could be seen over the massive reading desk. And there I preached flanked on one side by the huge windows for St. Matthew and St. Mark, on the other ones for St. Luke and St. John, and then directly behind my head the colourful St Andrew--for whom this church was named. Very impressive!

But this particular evening service, just as we were singing the closing hymn, a rather dishevelled young man came into the church and sat down in one of the back pews. And, then, as the Presiding Elder and I were walking toward the door during the postlude, this young man suddenly dropped down to his knees and began praying loudly. And I thought, “Oh, he doesn't belong here.” *He doesn't belong here.* What a sinful thing to think about anyone who comes to church. He was dirty, he was different; he was behaving in a way that members of that church would not behave; he was even frightening. The truth is he was unwanted and unwelcome there. I'm still repenting the thought--which is why I mention it now.

Such a thought puts me in good company, of course. Most of the congregation that night were thinking exactly the same thing. The first disciples also sometimes had such thoughts and therefore went to great effort to try to keep certain classes or types of people away from Jesus. And, then, on at least one occasion, Jesus himself had such a thought. He said to the Canaanite woman who was pleading for his help, “It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.”

The gospels often shock me with their stark realities of human stories, but I

don't think that any one sentence shocks me as much as that one. How could Jesus--the perfection of humanity--how could he have said that? I want to think that some scholars somewhere are going to decide that these were not actually authentic words of Jesus, that Matthew made them up, or that they were later additions to the gospel. No such luck so far though. Most scholars think just the opposite: put to all the usual tests of authenticity available in biblical scholarship, these are the words of Jesus himself; this horrible derisive insult, this rude and hurtful name-calling.

“Dog” was a common insult hurled by Jews against Gentiles. Because dogs were among the most ritually unclean of all animals in Jewish thought, “Dog” was one of the worst names to call anyone.

So why, then would he say such a thing? Well, because he was human; because he lived--like we do--in a certain time and place, a context of thoughts and behaviour. He was a middle-class Jewish male in first-century Israel. He ate and drank, worked hard, got tired, slept (though probably not enough), liked being with people and sometimes needed to be alone; he loved easily and sometimes became easily angry as well. He probably experienced everything that most humans in that time and place experienced--and the record shows that sometimes he was just as captive to his culture as everyone else is. Racism, sexism, class-ism (and probably several other 'isms' we could name) are at work here.

He was a man taught to disdain women. He was a Jew taught to hate Gentiles. He was a rabbi called to teach and heal in Israel--not Canaan. He was completely human, and it is this that shocks us--because we know he mirrors our own humanness.

But fortunately the brave and persistent Canaanite woman did not let him get away with it. She was not satisfied to take the insult because she believed that Jesus was more than merely human. Against all the conventions of *her* culture, she evidently believed that Jesus was sent from God. And so she calls forth his godliness with her pleading prayer on behalf of her daughter.

She appealed to the one she knew was her Saviour too when she said, “Lord, help me!”

Then Jesus, caught by her faith and his own divinity, looks again at her and this time suddenly sees her true worth. And then, Jesus *turns*--he changes

his mind, he repents of the way he had insulted her. And he says, “O woman, great is your faith!” She was no longer a ‘dog’ to him; she is a human person, a woman, a believer; she is a clear and present reminder of the universality of God’s love.

No matter how righteous (or self-righteous) we become, we never earn the right to say that anyone else does not belong to God, is not in fact our sister or brother, is not deserving of our welcome and our care. If we are ever tempted to be so exclusive, it would be good to remember this story of Canaanite woman. Here Jesus shows it is possible to overcome our human failings--to change our minds and our behaviour.

Jesus did not invent this process, of course. Scripture is full of the themes of repentance, forgiveness and redemption. Consider Joseph, for instance. His brothers had tried to kill him, then sold him as a slave to merchant travellers, and he ended up in Egypt having to work very hard at creating a new life--well, really, a new identity. Yet, when his starving brothers come begging him for help, he does not take any revenge on them. Instead he weeps and embraces them in complete reconciliation. He even lets them ‘off the hook’ for how they treated him, telling them that God has done what God always does and turned his tragedy into triumph. He who is now rich, famous and powerful reaches out in love to those who had once hated him with a passion. Yet Jesus goes beyond even this dramatic story when he who was thought to be perfect instead recognises his own imperfection and teaches the ultimate lesson in humility.

Neither culture nor tradition--nor even religious dogma--is excuse enough to bind us to any form of prejudice or intolerance. Because Jesus proved once and for all that such bonds *can* be broken. Jesus healed the daughter of a Canaanite woman who ‘didn’t belong’ in his world; but she did belong in God’s world, and Jesus knew that. Through that knowledge--that faith--Jesus was able to repent, to change his mind, to turn his momentary sin into everlasting grace.

That he *became* perfect in every respect I have no doubt, but he did it the hard way--and through this shows us the possibility of our own lives. Held in the embrace of God’s love is where everyone belongs.