

## The Jesus I Don't Want to Follow

Matthew 15:21-28

While most ministers choose favored scripture passages for their messages, this morning's Gospel passage turns out to be one of my absolute least favorite bits of scripture.

What do you do with a story where Jesus acts like a jerk? This is one case where those WWJD bracelets are no help at all.

There are several ways/options for dealing with difficult texts. I won't bore you with long descriptions of "historical-critical interpretation," rhetorical (effective language) or redaction (literary form) criticism, but all of those jostle about / joggle around as I try to approach texts like this.

First, I am tempted to just dismiss the text. There are several possible approaches to take here. First is to question the historical validity of the passage. We could say, "That doesn't sound like Jesus, so Jesus must not have said it." Or we can find other historical arguments as to why this quotation snuck into the Bible. Personally, I don't find that approach terribly helpful. Sure, it is fascinating to speculate as to what is historically accurate, but I think merging 'historically accurate' with 'valid and useful' misses the point of the canon of scripture – the collective works of scripture.

I think this type of criticism is most inclined to dismiss passages with which the critic is uncomfortable or disagrees – like the Jefferson Bible (it would be better named Jefferson Book). This is why, for example, I would be tempted to dismiss this passage of Matthew. Additionally, without the Bible and the tradition of the Church, we have no other option for encountering the 'historical' Jesus. Obviously, the writers, editors, and early worshippers in the church found this passage to be illuminating, so it was included in the Bible. Whether or not it accurately reflects a historical incident, it is part of the church's collective wisdom about Jesus. I do not out of hand dismiss that type of criticism; I simply don't find it personally useful.

Rather, for me anyway, that means taking each passage seriously and attempting to allow the scripture to speak, even when it is difficult or down-right offensive.

I tell you all this to explain why I even bother with this nasty little passage. If I can't dismiss this narrative – if I can't just cut it out and throw it away, what do I do with the fact that Jesus calls the Canaanite woman a dog (vs 26)?

Part of my difficulty here is one of perspective. I'm a Christian, so I'm supposed to imitate Jesus. But the Jesus I want to follow doesn't act like that Jesus in this passage. It reminds me of an image I once saw in a church - a very large, imposing, not-to-mention blonde Jesus, standing with his arms up and out looking very cranky. There are even flames coming out of his head. I thought to myself that if that's Jesus, I don't think I want to be a Christian....I like the Jesus of John chapter 4 better - where Jesus meets a Samaritan woman, and is really nice to her. He even reveals his messianic identity to her and makes her an evangelist.

I can happily identify with that Jesus. He's much friendlier than in the Matthew's version. He is radically inclusive, engaging in conversation with a woman - a Samaritan, who had been abandoned or divorced by a string of husbands...She was nearly as low on the social ladder as anyone could be. In this passage we learn from Jesus to reach out to the outcast without regard to status or social convention.

Now back to Matthew passage - it seems as though we get the complete opposite message. Here we have a woman, a Canaanite. Maybe not quite as much of an outcast as the Samaritan, but close enough. Jesus does not reach out to the woman - in fact, she has to come to him and make a scene before he even takes notice of her. And then he does not have kind words for her - in fact, he basically calls her a dog.

He doesn't meet her needs at first, but only after she seems to outwit him. When he finally affirms her faith and heals her daughter, it seems to be as much because she wore him out, as because of his goodness.

Jesus is a jerk.

If what we are supposed to learn from Jesus is that we are to reach out to and accept the outcast, then I'm getting mixed signals. How are we supposed to imitate this Jesus - Jesus with the Samaritan woman – Jesus with the Canaanite woman?

Here's where I have a confession to make. I realized in the process of preparing for this sermon that I was starting with a flawed assumption. I think it partly relates to being a white, straight, male. I approached this story with the narrative assumption that I am supposed to identify with Jesus - to imitate Jesus.

So, what does that assumption do to this story? It allows me to place myself in the position of authority. It prompts me to identify the woman as "other" - something different and outside of me. I then base my reactions to the story around the insider-outsider dynamic. I, white, male, straight, pastor, religious authority, American, middle-class, educated, dashing handsome, identify with Jesus, and so I am inside the circle. Everyone else is outside.

If you follow that line of reasoning, you will see why I have so much trouble with this passage. I, as a privileged individual, have assumptions based on other passages about exemplary Jesus as to how I am to relate to the "other." Those assumptions do involve subverting/preverting privilege and the acceptance of the other, but they begin with the construct of in and out, us and them, even holy and unholy. In this passage, the exemplary Jesus does not act according to my script. My privilege-based assumptions are challenged, and I am offended. Jesus does not treat the "other" as one with privilege is supposed to.

From a narrative standpoint, from the story, my interpretation really missed the boat. This wasn't a story designed to help me as a person of privilege learn how to relate to people without privilege. In fact, it is the other way around. The protagonist of the story, the hero, the mover and shaker, and the one worthy of emulation, of imitation is the woman. After all, Jesus praises her for her great faith at the end of the story. It is not enough, and perhaps it is even demeaning that my first reaction boils down to "isn't it nice that EVEN SHE could have great faith!"

How, then, can I enter into her story? How can I learn to identify with her?

The first hearers of this story would have recognized the woman's behaviors as liturgical, ritualistic actions. Her first phrases and movements mimic those that the earliest Christians practiced in church. Her opening phrase is "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." A moment later she kneels and says, "Lord, help me." These are actions of uninhibited worship.

Her words also imitate the form of many of the Psalms, especially the Psalms of complaint. In these complaint Psalms, the singer calls out to God, describe God's character, and demand that God act according to that character. A good example is the first part of Psalm 5:1-6:

*Listen to my words, LORD, consider my lament. Hear my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray. In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly. For you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness; with you, evil people are not welcome. The arrogant cannot stand in your presence. You hate all who do wrong; you destroy those who tell lies. The bloodthirsty and deceitful you, LORD, detest.*

Like the Psalmist, then, the Canaanite woman in Matthew calls out to Jesus, and she uses titles that identify his character. And like the Psalmist, she speaks with the absolute confidence that he will act according to that character, even if he doesn't know it yet. She doesn't give up, even when he dismisses her.

The barriers, the inhibitions, and the social constraints that were designed to keep this woman from Jesus could not silence her. She knew God's character and she knew that God's character defined Jesus.

So here we have a woman calling the traditional religious assumptions into question, insisting upon her own dignity, and demanding that Jesus act in accordance with his own character.

It amazes me to realize that this God of the Psalms and this Jesus we find in this Matthew scripture could be moved by prayer. These petitions are spoken not in the assumption that God will do whatever God will do anyway, but with the confidence that God acts in response to human freedom. Jesus changed course and blessed the faith of a non-Israelite woman, though it initially seemed like a distraction from his primary mission.

Although it has helped me to reframe this story, I am still left with a lingering annoyance about Jesus' behavior. It frustrates me...But I think that it is a reminder about the risks of incarnation (a living being embodying a deity).

Jesus (God) was made flesh as a first-century Jewish male. The Word (became flesh) was incarnate in a particular time, place, culture, and religion. Those constraints made the gospel more easily accessible to some, but also presented barriers to others. They clearly should have been barriers to the woman in this story. Jesus acted according to the conventions of his incarnation - he responded as any other 1st century Rabbi would. But the woman demanded that he **transform** those incarnational restraints. She called him to be incarnate for all of humanity, not just for Israel.

Incarnate - particular time, place, culture, and religion

In the same way, the church continues to incarnate. We give flesh to the body of Christ in our world, here and now. We do so within the constraints of culture, race, gender, orientation, class, religion, and geography. These are good things, to be sure, but they can also be limiting things.

Do we assume that the specificity/particularity of our incarnation defines God - that God looks like us?...Do we believe the manipulations of culture, politics, and religion when they tell us that God does not hear us? Or do we embrace the incarnation as a reality of humanity as a whole - the promise that all people, even we - can come to grow more fully into the image of God? Amen.

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