

Table Scraps
Sermon on Matthew 15:21-28 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, August 14, 2005

The CBS television network has found a hit with its reality program “Big Brother.” If you are like me and have never seen the show, the premise is simple: The network auditions a cast of fifteen or so average Joes and Janes, moves them all into one house, locks them in, and turns on the cameras that are set up throughout the house. The viewer is treated to watching people who have never met one another try to get along, develop friendships, have romantic liaisons, verbally abuse one another, lie, cheat, and otherwise attempt to make life miserable for their housemates. Situations arise over all kinds of issues: personal hygiene, questions of morality, and whose turn it is to take out the trash among others. As you might imagine, there are also tensions that arise over the diverse racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds that are represented on the show. Of course, this being network television, it is all very politically correct, and the worst thing that can happen to you is getting voted out of the house.

If Jesus’ life and ministry were like Big Brother, we might vote him off the show after today’s episode in which he appears to us to be “narrow-minded, brusque, and unconcerned about [a] woman’s urgent need.”¹ In the Bible’s version of reality shows, Jesus and his disciples have withdrawn to the region of Tyre and Sidon, an area northwest of Jesus’ native Galilee. Matthew tells us that, “Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon” (15:22). Typically reality shows have a definite location, like New York or LA, and show how characters grow and develop. Matthew as the writer, director, and producer of this Gospel show sometimes uses a little artistic license, as he does here. It isn’t clear, for instance, whether Jesus

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 175.

actually arrived in the region of Tyre and Sidon or merely approached it. Nor is it clear whether the woman came out to meet Jesus on *her* home turf or came out to meet Jesus on *his* home turf. In terms of character development, by calling the woman a Canaanite, Matthew emphasizes the fact that she was not merely a non-Jew, and so unclean, but also one of Israel's pagan enemies.

And so as Tom Long points out, "This encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman is situated in every way 'on the border'—on the boundary between the old and the new, between male and female, between Jew and Gentile, between friend and enemy, between the holy and the demonic."² And our expectation of Jesus—because we are liberally-inclined, warm-hearted Methodists who have been trained (appropriately so) not to discriminate on the basis of sex, race, or religion—is that he will rush out to help this woman who is pleading for her daughter who is possessed and tormented by a demon. We know Jesus will do this because we believe that above all else Jesus was nice and that he liked to help people.

And so we are more than a little taken aback when Jesus responds to the woman's cries for help with stony silence. He seems to ignore the woman and her pleas entirely; he gives her no answer at all. I wonder if this Canaanite woman, the mother of a daughter tormented and ravaged by a demon, feels like Cindy Sheehan feels. Mrs. Sheehan is the mother of a son killed in Iraq, who has encamped just outside the president's ranch hoping for a meeting. Both are mothers—mothers who love their children. Mothers who love their children so much that they will do what it takes to get an answer, even when their cries are met with silence and seeming indifference.

And so the Canaanite woman cried, indeed screamed and shouted, for Jesus, Lord, Son of David, to have mercy and heal her daughter. Soon she, like Cindy Sheehan, created a scene and began to attract attention. The disciples, like good and loyal Secret Service agents, go to Jesus

² Ibid., 174.

and suggest that he send this woman away. Curiously, Jesus does not send the woman away, nor does he go out to meet her. Instead he says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt. 15:24). Whether she heard him or not, the message was clear enough: there would be no healing that day. Jesus’ mission was to Israel and only to Israel. No Gentiles need apply. Jesus’ mission, like that of John the Baptist, was to Israel alone in order to turn God’s chosen people back to God.

A mother in need is not easily deterred with bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo and political posturing, however. So the woman “came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me’” (15:25). She “simply ignores what has been said and, kneeling, again asks for help.”³ In a daring move, the woman responds to Jesus by refusing to go away. Indeed, she persists in her approach, displaying tenacity borne of very great faith that Jesus can heal her daughter. Surely, we think, Jesus will at last be moved by pity for this woman and her plight.

But Jesus shows no signs of pity, no hint of sympathy, not so much as a drop of compassion. Instead, he utters a “harsh little parable.” To her face Jesus says, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (15:26). Once again, the message was clear: the Jews, God’s chosen people, were the children; the food was God’s salvation; and the dogs were the Gentiles—pagans, unclean people like her. There is a lot of debate among scholars as to what Jesus meant by dogs. Did he mean that the Gentiles were no better than the wild, stray dogs much despised in Jewish circles, or did he mean to refer to household pets? Either way, Jesus had called her a dog. It is a response that some scholars have said “almost inevitably strikes the modern Christian as too offputting, even cruel, as designed to wound a human heart.”⁴

³ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* vol. 2, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991) 551.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 553.

In the very face of insult, the woman does not turn away in dismay or disgust. In fact, she agrees with Jesus' basic premise. "Yes, Lord," she says, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (15:27). And here the woman does a very clever thing. Having three times called Jesus "Lord," now she reminds him that even the dogs eat the food that falls from the tables of their masters, or their lords. As she has twice before, this remarkable woman responds to Jesus in humility and faith, acknowledging that Jesus is right and his argument is sound. But now she urges Jesus to take that argument one step farther: Even the dogs can be fed at the same time that the children are fed, and neither goes hungry. Even if his mission is to Israel, Jesus can bring blessing to other people who believe. In God's bountiful love and grace and healing and forgiveness and salvation there is plenty for everyone.

Such is the woman's great faith that it can see a way through to claim a part of God's saving acts in human history. The woman never denies the truth of Jesus' claim, that he is sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Indeed, this must be true if there is to be any salvation at all, for as Jesus said in John 4:22, "[S]alvation is from the Jews." As Tom Long has remarked, "Jesus is not a generic Savior, an anonymous Superman from a distant planet."⁵ Jesus was a Jew who was sent to the Jews in order to save the Jews. In order to be the savior of the world, Jesus must remain faithful to his divine vocation and fulfill God's promise of deliverance for Israel.

And in the greatness and generosity and mercy and benevolence of God, what God does for Israel, he does for all of us. He fulfills his promise of salvation and deliverance first to Israel, then to the world, so that "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:13). On the day of salvation, God will gather his people, and set a feast for them. And all shall eat and be satisfied. And no one will have to eat the table scraps. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ Long, 176.