

Proper 15 A  
Matthew 15:21-28  
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Notes not for publication

This text always provokes a flurry of debate, mostly centered on the fact that Jesus as much as calls this woman a dog. How could Jesus be so unchristian? How could Jesus say such a thing? Some speculate that this story shows Jesus' humanity, that this woman caught him tired from walking on water, dragging Peter along in the water, and he just snapped. Others point out that when he said dog, he used a word that in Greek really means something more like housedog or puppy; they propose that he meant it affectionately, wink, wink. Still others see the Canaanite woman as an early feminist, fighting for her daughter's life and changing the mind of Jesus himself.

For me, today, the message of this text does not depend upon reading the mind of Jesus and figuring out why he said what he did. For me, it's enough to be disturbed by Jesus and the way he seems to withhold God's grace from this woman. To be sure, she has no business approaching him; she is a Gentile, a non-Jew, and as such unclean. If Jesus related to her in any way, it would make him unclean, too. Then there's the simple fact that she's a woman and he's a man, and they're not really supposed to mix either, especially out in the middle of the street. She was completely out of bounds in asking Jesus for anything, and this is what Jesus' attitude communicates. He ignores her, he tells her that what she wants is off limits to her, and he equates her with an animal.

Jesus has already said back in the tenth chapter that he has come only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel (10:5). The whole gospel of Matthew really emphasizes this, the Jewishness of Jesus, his clear connection with the history and tradition of Israel. But here we begin to see a shift take place. Whatever the reason, whatever he may have been thinking, Jesus plays a role here that allows us to see the lid being blown off the assumptions of good people of faith. That's who the Pharisees and scribes and just regular Jews were. We sometimes think they were bad people, out to get Jesus, but they were just trying to do the right thing, trying to practice the faith as it was handed down to them.

And part of what was handed down to them was a clear identity as people different from everybody else. They had been through a lot over the centuries—slavery, exile, and now occupation by the Romans. If they'd started budging on the right way to eat or worship, they could have just become assimilated into whatever was around them. So they'd drawn a clear line around themselves, and to cross that line, in their minds, was to threaten their identity as God's chosen people. Because if you're the chosen people, that implies that there are some not-chosen people, and I don't know who would want to make that switch. The line becomes your defense, your identity, your salvation.

That line is what this woman pushes Jesus to cross. And it just makes me wonder whether Jesus' backing into this move is a sign of how hard it is for us, how much we resist doing a new thing. I can hear us in him, saying, this idol-worshipping

woman is not my job. You can only do so much, you know, so you have to spend your energy where it will count.

I sure know I've said this very thing more than once myself. Social service work will sure teach you that no matter how much you help, there will always be that many more people to help the next day. The need does not go away, so, we say, you've got to draw the line somewhere. During my time at First Church in Victoria, I supervised a parish nurse named Dawn who, as part of her job, counseled diabetic patients and got them free supplies. Each person's appointment took at least an hour, often more, and sometimes the people showed up having done what they were supposed to, and sometimes not.

Then there were the other problems they brought with them—the light bills, the bad teeth, the lack of money for decent food, the bad kidneys, the language barrier, the paperwork. It was an incredibly time-consuming part of Dawn's job, and when we looked at the nurse as a resource, it was clear that she could have helped many more people in other ways that weren't so labor intensive. So I told her over and over not to take any new diabetics, and to get rid of any she had who didn't stay right with the program. "You'll never be able to help all the diabetics in Victoria," I used to say, "so you might as well draw the line somewhere. You could be a lot of help to a lot of other people."

It was seemingly an unwise use of a precious resource. Yet even so, my friend Dawn counted a goodly number of people who'd had their lives changed through their interaction in her office. They had learned about nutrition, started exercising, gone off

insulin—all because someone had cared enough about them to invest time and teach them something new. Not everybody responded this way, but in those who did the gratitude was sincere and profound. And Dawn felt the same way. She told me she stood in awe of the way God worked in those lives, and how God worked through her. I tried to make her draw a line, but she regularly crossed it. She did say no when she needed to. But she also found that, time and time again, when she said yes, she ended up looking into the face of Christ.

I don't know why Jesus is initially so stingy in this story, sort of like me wanting the nurse to serve just the people who looked like a good bet. But I do know that in this difficult portrait of Jesus, we can see ourselves, ordering our lives, being efficient with our time. And as Jesus has his mind changed by the woman, we can see how we, too, might respond in a new way to the people who live outside the lines we've drawn around ourselves. If we are to be Jesus' body in the world, we must be open to knowing the needs of the world, and we must allow ourselves to be changed and moved, as Jesus did.

For these folks do show up at our door, too. High gas prices have hit the working poor especially hard lately, and our community assistance ministry, Operation Good Shepherd, has been swamped with requests for help. This ministry is supported by various churches in town, as well as by individuals, with some very committed givers here in this church. The program has rotated to different churches over the years, and this year our Barnabas Connection volunteered to take a turn. So our folks have seen a lot more action than before, with poor people and their multi-layered crises showing up

at our door. And since every program has limits, we're faced more and more with telling people no.

It's such a hard place to be. It's painful to watch people in pain in this kind of open-ended manner, and it's very tempting to start to rationalize drawing a line in our minds between us and them. They made this and that stupid mistake, they didn't plan ahead, and we want to make sure they're going to spend what we give them wisely. There's no question we have to be good stewards of the money given for ministry. But we enter dangerous territory the moment we begin to believe that there's something different about us, something better than in these people who are in trouble all the time. It's easy to go there, because it shields us from the pain, the humiliation of a woman kneeling, begging for help for her child. It's easy to go there in our minds and hearts, and that's how some of the worst injustices of our world are allowed to happen.

But it is a delusion to believe that we live inside some charmed line. The mark of the cross upon us, the water applied to our heads and bodies in baptism sets us apart, but only as people who have heard God's word of grace and have responded with joy. God has claimed us and called us Christ's people, but for the purpose of using us to help claim and call others. All four gospels made it clear that Jesus came for both Jews and Gentiles, for all. Yet as we maintain our system of line-drawing, the scriptures also tell us over and over that God is with people who suffer and are in trouble. Christ tells us that we will find him in the faces of people who fall outside the lines. When their voices call to us, from near or far, I believe it is the voice of God calling us to move to a new place.

And what's important about that for me today is not just that we need to be helping poor people. It is that when we wrestle with the hard realities lived by so many of the world's people, when we decide not to build walls to protect ourselves, when we enter into and sit with the discomfort of others, we will find the door open to deep connection with God. We will see past the illusions of comfort and plenty, to the knowledge that it is God's grace alone that sustains us. It is the love of God that gives us identity. People who have no place to turn often know this better than the rest of us. The woman who wanted healing for her daughter called Jesus, Lord—she who was not a Jew; she knelt in front of him and persisted, trusting, knowing somehow that this God would give her life.

The promise is the same for us. Do not hesitate; do not fear. Step across the line today, and give yourself to the boundless love of Christ's good news.