

Epworth Chapel on the Green
August 20, 2017
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 56:1-7
Psalm 67
Romans 11:13-32
Matthew 15:21-28

Our Gospel lesson this morning seems, at least on the surface, to depict Jesus in a less than flattering moment.

It appears that Jesus is rude and insensitive, and lacks compassion for a Gentile woman who cries to him for help. His initial response is simply to ignore her. When she persists and he is compelled to react, his words strike us as unduly harsh. First, he says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Upon the woman’s further persistence, Jesus says to her: “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (v. 26).

So, in a matter of seconds Jesus appears to say: “There are insiders and there are outsiders, and *you* are an outsider -- and a most inferior outsider at that.”

After struggling with this text a great deal this week, the key that opened it up for me was when I realized that the main character of this passage is *not Jesus*, but this Gentile woman. Yes, Jesus’ words must be acknowledged and not minimized. And I think that some context may help us with that. *But it is this*

woman and her persistent faith in the face of great need that is the centerpiece of the text.

Notice how she first approaches Jesus. She greets him as the “Son of David.” It’s rather remarkable that a Gentile would greet Jesus in a way that identifies him in terms of Jewish expectations of the Messiah. In this sense, it is ironic that this woman seems to have a better grasp of Jesus’ identity than do his own disciples, who won’t confess him as the Messiah until chapter 16.

This woman, however, begs his mercy and entreats his power over a demon that is tormenting her daughter. This woman is an unclean outsider, one who is considered an enemy of Israel. Yet, she seems to have more insight into Jesus’ identity than his disciples.

Jesus’ first response to her is that he has been sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. This seems harsh and exclusive, but I actually did some checking, and discovered to my surprise that there are only *four* incidents in the New Testament where Jesus ministers to Gentiles.

Our epistle lesson sheds further light on this. Paul reminds the church at Rome that although Gentiles have been mercifully accepted into God’s covenant family, *historically and theologically God’s election of Israel came first.*

I personally don’t think Jesus is being rude to this woman, but rather is saying, “Look, I have come to call the covenant people of Israel to repent and to

accept their Messiah, and the need is so great that it requires all of my energy.” A few chapters prior to this in chapter 9, Jesus demonstrates this when he tells the disciples to pray for laborers to enter the fields that are “white unto harvest.”

Yet here before him stands this Gentile woman. Again, the irony is palpable here. John, in his Gospel writes, “He came to his own, and his own did not recognize him or receive him.” And now one who is not “his own” stands before him, and recognizes him for who he is.

We know this because not only does she call him the “Son of David,” but she *kneels* before him. In Matthew, kneeling is an action done for one who is a king. We see this with the Magi in chapter 2, and with the mother of James and John who comes to Jesus in chapter 20.

Not only is kneeling a recognition of kingship, but it is also a recognition of power in Matthew. Several times people kneel before Jesus in the Gospel seeking healing, and at the end of the Gospel Jesus’ disciples kneel before him when he declares that all power and authority have been given to him by the Father. When this woman kneels before Jesus, she recognizes him not only as the One who has the right to sit on the throne of David, but as the One who wields power over evil.

And at this point she is met with the remark that it isn’t right to take children’s food and give it to the dogs. The word Matthew uses for “dog” here is a term used of small pets that beg food from their owner’s table. It seems that Jesus

is comparing this woman's status as a Gentile to the status of a lap dog that longs to be fed from its master's table.

And as striking as this comment is, the woman's response is perhaps even *more* striking. She accepts her status as the "family dog" by claiming that even the family dog enjoys crumbs from the table.

For me, I understand this woman here to be saying: "Look, I get it that your mission is primarily to the children of Israel. I'm not trying to thwart your mission. *But you are powerful enough that there is enough grace and mercy for the house of Israel and plenty left over for the rest of us.* You are powerful enough that even the leftovers of your grace and mercy are enough for me and my daughter."

What this woman seems to understand is that Jesus is not merely hope for Israel – he is hope for the whole world.

It is this kind of amazing faith that moves Jesus to grant her request. She embodies what we see in the Gospels, where foreigners and outsiders seem to recognize and worship Jesus while the religious leaders and "insiders" oppose him, and eventually take his life.

As we come to the Table this morning, it is helpful for us to ask ourselves *who* we are in this story. And I think the answer is clear: We are this woman. We are the outsiders. We stand in a long line with those who've been "grafted in" to

God's covenant promises through God's grace and mercy. Left to our own devices, we are like the family dog begging scraps from the Master's table.

But in the richness of God's grace and mercy, we have been granted a place at His table, where we feed not on scraps or leftovers, but on the very best God has to offer.

So come with faith. Come with humility, and receive the grace he offers you through his body and blood. And let it strengthen you in your service to Christ and to those he loves.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.