

BIBLE READING: Matthew 15:21-28

SERMON

Hearing the odd confrontation between Jesus and the woman in today's gospel reading might well provoke us to ask, "What's wrong with this picture?"

Jesus and his disciples went into a Gentile region near Galilee when a foreign woman asked him to heal her daughter, but he flat-out ignored her. He would not even acknowledge the request. What's wrong with this picture?

The woman continued; she kept shouting after Jesus and the disciples. Finally, he announced that he had been sent only to the Jews – not Gentiles like her. He dismissed her. What's wrong with this picture?

But the woman would not give up. She knelt before him and pleaded, "Lord help me." His answer? "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." He practically calls her a dog. What's wrong with this picture?

Still, with courage and desperation, she persisted. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Finally, the picture begins to make sense. Jesus commended her and affirmed her as a beloved child of God. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Can there be any question that this is a difficult story – a picture that simply does not seem right – as we witness Jesus, on the surface at least, acting in an arbitrary, harsh, and unloving manner?

For centuries, many attempts have struggled to make sense of it. One holds that the Greek word Jesus used for "dog" really means "puppy." Another suggests that it was all a test, that Jesus treated the woman harshly in order to test his disciples' understanding of God. Or, perhaps because he wanted to test the humility and faith of the Gentile woman. Or maybe he was saying to the woman, "My disciples regard Gentiles as dogs. Now what do you and I have to say about that?" Possibly other theories provide acceptable answers to why we are bound to ask, "What's wrong with this picture?"

Maybe – just maybe – the following suggestion will help. It is conceivable that this is a story that comes from an early time in Jesus' ministry and demonstrates a stage of growth in the development of his understanding of God's universal values. Imagine that this story is literally true as told – that there is no hidden meaning, no symbolic understanding, no false reporting of the encounter

between the woman and Jesus. Imagine that what Jesus said and did in this story reflects exactly what he believed – at the time.

Let us not forget that Jesus was reared in the first century as a Jew and that he lived his early life only among Jews and that he spent almost all of his ministry among Jews – the children of Israel. His training was Jewish. His bible was what we call the Old Testament. He absorbed a faith that, perhaps from a sense of self-preservation –considered Gentiles as other, and often as repulsive, unclean, taboo.

So, let us imagine that at the beginning of this encounter, Jesus was stuck in such a mindset. And then, he came to a place where Gentiles lived. There, he encountered this persistent woman. If he had not had time to think much about Gentiles, this would have been his first chance to re-think commonly accepted views about Gentiles.

As he thought it through, he kept his silence at first, not knowing exactly how to respond to the person confronting him. Imagine him praying about what he should do – about what God intended for him in this emotion-filled moment. Imagine him wondering how he could deny her request for healing her daughter. But, at the same time, how could he fail to follow the traditional teachings? How could he even begin to concentrate on the needs of the Gentile world and still have time to complete his primary ministry among the Jews and reach Jerusalem – where his destiny lay? So, he said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

But when she persisted all the more, as he tried to escape the grasp of her need, his frustration with his dilemma poured out: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and give it to the dogs.”

But also imagine his love pouring out when she countered, “At least give me a crumb, like a dog under the dinner table.” Let us imagine how her words seemed like a mirror held up in front of common understanding. And let us imagine her words cutting to the heart of Jesus’ compassion and his faith. Now, he realizes that standing before him was a Gentile whose faith and desire for God’s healing exceeded that of so many others.

So, he was changed. Putting his greater mission aside for the moment, he realized, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed.

If we can follow this interpretation, we will see Jesus the man wrestling with his understanding of how to be the human face of God. We will see that he

experienced growth in faith and understanding, that he gained a new insight about the God-given preciousness of all people – Jews and Gentile alike.

Though he had to continue the main thrust of his work among the Jews, the door was now open for ministry to and acceptance of Gentiles, as well. This major change – this renewal – this revolution in the accustomed way of religious thinking of his day came to him because of his internal struggle presented by the challenging power of a truth-telling foreigner. If this interpretation can lead us to a more wholesome truth, we will see today's Gospel story as the foundation for the early Church as it moved beyond its Palestinian, Jewish roots.

Regardless of how anyone might view this interpretation of the strange encounter between Jesus and a foreign woman, the universal lesson of the early Church rings through the centuries to us. Their first inner struggle led to their transformation from being a regional sect of Judaism into a universal religion for all people. This revolution in thinking and experience is part of the legacy of those who began to spread the Good News of God in Christ throughout the world.

Their transformation reflects challenges of inner struggles faced by every succeeding generation of Christians. Their transformation, their God-provoked re-imagining of a long-held, commonly practiced belief can mirror and inform the struggles of ourselves and our culture in this excruciatingly troublesome year.

Of course, understanding Jesus' experience as told in today's Gospel reading is essential for our spiritual, emotional, and cultural health in the current difficult environment. Amid a global pandemic, we face a crisis of confidence in our society and faith in our political leadership. There seem to be so many strident voices - angry voices questioning all we have held as true. "What's wrong with this picture?"

We can learn, as always, from Jesus. In his encounter with the Gentile woman, he remained silent at first, letting her talk. Isn't this a model for listening to people who are not like us? Can we not learn from the encounter related in today's Gospel reading, that listening to the stories of others unlike us, engaging in courageous conversations, adopting open-mindedness, practicing tolerance, and living in mutual respect can lead to a better sense of loving community? We know what others may not – that no one is a "dog" and that everyone – everyone – is a beloved child of God, deserving of God's grace found in Jesus.

We have the opportunity to provide a correction to our demoralized community as the followers of Jesus and the descendants of the first Christians who committed themselves to fully reflecting the love of God.

Acknowledgement: Rev. Ken Kesselus