

WHY IS JESUS ACTING LIKE A JERK?

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: I am the LORD your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes. My ordinances you shall observe and my statutes you shall keep, following them: I am the LORD your God. You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the LORD.

Leviticus 18:1-5 NRSV

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Matthew 15:21-28 NRSV

Yesterday I ran into Krista Kiger the minister at First Presbyterian Church down the street. She mentioned that she was invoking my name in her sermon today. Knowing that this is rarely a good sign, I asked her in what way. She explained that my sermon titles tended to be braver than hers, especially for today's gospel reading, which she, I and thousands of other ministers are preaching on today. Of course, Krista was being kind. There is a fine line between bravery and foolishness. In order to avoid the latter, I'd like to state from the outset that my sermon title is "Why is Jesus Acting Like a Jerk?" Note the words "acting like" please; I'm not saying Jesus is a jerk.

When I saw this passage was the lectionary gospel reading for today, I almost skipped it. I try to stick with the lectionary—the three-year cycle of scripture passages to preach on given Sundays used by many ministers—because it forces me to examine passages I might normally overlook. Left to my own devices, the pool of scriptures I would choose from would probably be a shallow one. Nonetheless, I really don't like this passage; I never have. I remember the first time I can recall reading it. It troubled me enough to ask my youth minister about it. His answer did not satisfy me, and I really have yet to find a satisfactory explanation of this passage. Told in different versions in the first three gospels, this story is probably the one that most challenges my understanding of Jesus.

I have experienced Jesus as the one who welcomes all of us into community with him and God. The scriptures that speak most to me are the passages where Jesus rejects the divisions of religion and culture that divide people from one another and where he

reaches across them in order to show people how they are loved by God. My conception of Jesus as one who shows grace to all who come to him stands at the center of my religious beliefs and my vocation as a minister. So, it is no wonder that I find the passage from Matthew 15 to be threatening in the extreme.

A woman of a different nationality comes to Jesus and asks him to help her daughter who is “tormented by a demon.” Yet, as one translation puts it, “He answered her not a word.”¹ That phrase was the title of Rev. Kiger’s sermon: “He answered her not a word.” That is the rub here. Why would Jesus ignore anyone in need? It gets worse however, because Jesus not only ignores her but he insults her. To me, it seems that Jesus is acting like a jerk. This is not the Jesus I know.

As I said, I almost picked a different passage for this morning. I did not want to preach on this passage, because I do not know what to make of it. Usually, I like to wrestle with a passage and come to some kind of conclusion about it that I can preach on. At that point, I try to gather illustrations and stories to deliver that idea. This Sunday, however, I am still wrestling with the text. I feel like I need to ask first-time visitors to come back on another Sunday when I’ll be better prepared to preach. All I can do today is be honest about my mixed feelings about Jesus’ actions as depicted in this text and hope that by sharing how I am wrestling with it, you may gain something from wrestling with it as well. So, here goes.

In this troublesome passage, Jesus heads off into Gentile territory. He has just had a debate with Jewish religious leaders over what makes a person ritually unclean. Jesus takes the line that it is not what goes into a person’s mouth that makes a person unclean but what comes out of it. With that in mind, one might think that Jesus’ words to the Canaanite woman will be kind and compassionate words, but instead it seems like just the opposite. A woman comes to Jesus asking for him to free her daughter from demonic torment, but Jesus ignores her. When the disciples ask Jesus to send her away, Jesus replies, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” When she comes and kneels before him, Jesus says, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” That’s right, Jesus calls her a dog! It is only when she seemingly outwits him with a quick comeback, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” that Jesus heals her daughter. Who is this Jesus who must be cajoled into showing mercy upon someone in need? For that matter, who is this woman who one-ups Jesus?

Unlike in Mark’s Gospel where he calls the woman who comes to Jesus “Syrophenician,” Matthew says she is a “Canaanite.” The notes in my study bible say this term is used to indicate she is a Gentile.² I think there is sufficient evidence however, to indicate that the term is freighted with much more negative cultural weight than that.³

In our first scripture reading this morning, we heard from the book of Leviticus. Rarely does Leviticus get a lot of mention in Christian preaching (except by preachers looking for proof-texts to use against people they don’t like), but it is helpful to us if we wish to

understand ideas of religious purity prevalent in ancient Hebrew religion. Chapters 17-26 of Leviticus are commonly called “The Holiness Code,” and they contain laws that set apart Israel from the surrounding nations. The beginning of chapter 18 which was read this morning is an introduction to a section on prohibited sexual behavior common among non-Hebrews, particularly the Canaanites.⁴ These people who inhabited the land promised to the people of Israel by God were to be driven out and there was supposed to be as little intermingling as possible between the two groups.⁵ In the centuries that followed, “Canaanite” continued to be used as a derogatory term meant to indicate pagans who worshipped other gods and behaved in immoral ways.⁶ By using this term, Matthew seems to be indicating that she in some way represents all that observant Jews should avoid.

The Jesus I know would normally grant this woman’s request and use the occasion as a teaching moment for the disciples about God being transcending cultural boundaries, but that’s not what the Jesus of this passage does. A clue to his motivation is found in his statement, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Jesus had earlier told his disciples not to go among the Gentiles (10:6), which seems to indicate that Jesus saw his earthly ministry as being to the Jewish people. Even so, we know where the Gospel is heading—to the entire world. We are tipped off to this at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel when the Magi—representing the Gentile world—come to worship the newborn king (2:1-12),⁷ and at its conclusion Jesus commissions the disciples to “make disciples of all nations” (28:19), but in the meantime Jesus seems focused upon Israel. Could it be that the Canaanite woman did not fit into his itinerary? If so, couldn’t he have been a little bit more polite before brushing her off?

The biblical scholar Douglas Hare offers three options for dealing with the dilemma of this passage:

1. The story is inauthentic.
2. Jesus statements are not as harsh as modern readers think.
3. The story should be interpreted as it stands in all its harshness.⁸

The problem with option number one is that the same charge can be made of any passage in the gospels, and so it doesn’t really get us anywhere. Besides, even arrogant scholars quick to take on the role of ultimate arbiters of history believe that precisely because of its awkwardness the story echoes something that probably happened.⁹ That leaves the final two options.

I believe which choice you make depends upon your own understanding of Jesus. For those who understand Jesus from a more traditionally Trinitarian perspective, the option that says Jesus actions and words are not as harsh as they appear may seem preferable. God is love after all. For those who understand Jesus in human rather than divine terms, the option that says Jesus really could be this harsh may be palatable if not appealing. From this perspective, it may not seem very radical to say that Jesus had to overcome his own cultural biases just like the rest of us.

The latter view would accept that Jesus was a typical Jewish man of his day, and he was merely responding to a Gentile—a female Gentile at that!—as was culturally the norm. Even if he was a prophet or an enlightened teacher, he still had some growth areas to work on in terms of God’s equal love for everyone. Even some readers who accept Jesus as fully divine and fully human would allow for Jesus to have an expanding understanding of God’s saving activity in the world.

For those who, like me, find this passage troubling because it challenges their understanding of Jesus and therefore their understanding of God, perhaps there is hope to be found in what the text does not provide to us. As I read the text—the words alone—it appears to me that Jesus changes his mind about healing this woman’s daughter and perhaps changes his mind about how and when Gentiles will relate to the kingdom of God. The text does not reveal, however, Jesus’ tone or facial expression when he said these words. It does not tell us if there was a gleam in his eye, a smile on his face or a knowing wink exchanged between the woman and himself. Perhaps they both took in the prejudices of the disciples and acted a scene on their behalf. Perhaps Jesus allowed the woman to “outwit” him in order to drive home the point that the faith of a Gentile woman could meet or even exceed that of a faithful Jewish man.¹⁰ Perhaps, given their previous discussion of what makes a person unclean, Jesus lets the woman be an object lesson of faith for the disciples. Perhaps. . .

No matter the depth of our confusion over Jesus’ actions in this story, what is very clear is the commendable faith of the Canaanite woman. She demonstrated the extent a mother will go to on behalf of her child by humbling herself before Jesus and even undergoing ridicule. She refused to take “no” for an answer. Her understanding of Jesus’ identity exceeded that of the disciples and depending on your point of view may even have exceeded Jesus’ own self-understanding. This unnamed woman is the hero of the story and she must not be lost behind the questions this text poses.

The woman is an outsider looking in on the people who should know Jesus best, yet it is she rather than they who has the better understanding of God’s all-embracing love. Like the disciples (and maybe even Jesus), we place limitations upon just how far the grace and love of God will extend. Outsiders remind us that we do not control whom God will love and it is not our place to refuse others their place in God’s community. Often it is the outsider who calls our attention to those in need whom we have ignored. Just as this mother called out for healing on behalf of her daughter and taught this group of men about God’s mercy, so also do people looking in on our church cry out to us. No matter whether we think Jesus was acting like a jerk in this passage or not, we must not ignore their cries.

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¹ See the King James Version translation of verse 23.

² Dennis Duling, notes on the Gospel of Matthew in *The Harper-Collins Study Bible* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1989), 1886.

³ Richard Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 195-196.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the purposes of Leviticus 18:1-5 and its depiction of the Canaanites, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1518-1523.

⁵ From the stories of the patriarchs (see Genesis 28:1, 6) to the time of the monarchy and exile (see Psalm 1-6:34-38) to the time of the return from exile (Ezra 9:1-12), faithful Hebrews did not intermarry with Canaanites or have anything to do with their religion. The opposite appears to be often the case in reality, however.

⁶ See verse 56 in *Susanna*, an apocryphal addition to the book of Daniel, dating from around the time of Jesus.

⁷ Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 124.

⁸ Douglas Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 176-177.

⁹ For example, see Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar, *The Acts of Jesus: What Did Jesus Really Do?* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 213-214.

¹⁰ David Rhoads has an excellent study of Mark's version of this story. In it, he notes that the woman is an example of true discipleship over and against the disciples. Although he is not referring to Matthew's account, I think the woman plays the same role in both Gospels. David Rhoads, "Jesus and the Syrophenician Woman in Mark: A Narrative-Critical Study," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 62 (1994), 369.