



Matthew 15:21-28

NRSVUE

SPIRIT IN THE DESERT

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.

Grace and peace to you from the mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

In this story, my eyes go directly to the words Jesus said to a distraught and desperate mother.

A woman knelt before Jesus and said, “Have mercy on me Lord; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” This woman did not belong to a group Jesus called, “the lost sheep of Israel.” His response was silence. The disciples spoke up and said she had been annoying them for a while also.

Why is the subversive, radically loving Jesus suddenly ignoring this woman? The mentor of love we have come to know in so many other stories.

Before this conversation with her, he, a Jew, had violated temple law, healed in the temple and let disciples harvest wheat on the sabbath. He talked to Samaritan women, touched lepers and prostitutes reminding them they belong.

Remember when Jesus was told that a young girl at home was near death? Jesus delayed going to her because someone else engaged him with a problem.

Jesus was not a slave to time or bound by mission statements. Jesus always had time, and people were his mission. Yet now he seems to be saying that it would be mission creep to help someone who didn’t belong to the “lost sheep of Israel.”

I have listened to explanations concerning the cultural history of the Greeks and what it he meant when he called her a dog. I have heard preachers say he was being endearing because it really meant puppy. Last time I cuddled a soft, sharp-tooth puppy or cleaned up a puppy mess, it was still a dog.

Would these explanations really change the seeming disregard Jesus expressed toward this woman? Some say this was meant to demonstrate her faith in Jesus, but was he really trying to see how much faith she had? Was he waiting for her to beg?

To me Jesus is behaving like a destination person rather than a journey person. I tend to think Jesus was more of a journey person because he already knew the destination. God wins, Love wins, and all things will be made right.

But this gospel Jesus would be like a dad taking his family on a cross-country vacation to Disneyland. Dad would lecture at the start saying, “Ok kids, if we want to be there by 6:08 AM as the crow flies, we must follow the schedule. Bathroom stops are located on the map and we will not stop before. There is an empty jug in the back seat. Fifteen minutes for gas and a snack and then it’s back on the road. No, we won’t stop to see the giant dinosaur. And do not feed any stray dogs your snacks for the road!”

Jesus was a journey person, yet he did not have time to help this woman because she was outside his mission? Helping a woman designated an outsider by the Roman government seems right in his wheelhouse! Instead, his words appear to instruct her to sit in the back of his “lost sheep of Israel or bust” discipleship bus.

It doesn’t help that today’s “Jesus never sinned” followers try to rewrite this story to fit their theology—or at least to help Jesus out with his reputation.

If we are going to take this story at face value, Jesus simply called her a person who was of less significance than the people he was sent to minister.

Whether he called her a dog, an endearing little puppy, or a Syrophoenician, it is uncomfortable to witness what appears to be human indifference from Jesus before he seems to come to his senses.

I have heard it said that the woman’s humility was being honored by Jesus. But what if we are witnessing the humility of Jesus instead? Could it be that we would then discover another pathway for those moments when we feel resistance to changing our way? What is worse: a response of silence or an unwillingness to change course?

Jesus displayed this change of course when the woman showed her willingness to take the position of a puppy begging for bread. The woman and Jesus debate and Jesus changes course. Let’s look at it again.

When the woman expressed her desperation over her daughter, Jesus was silent. The disciples may have felt awkward when Jesus said nothing. Perhaps they interpreted his silence as a sign that he was willing to send her away.

At the time, Jesus was standing before a questioning crowd scattered with Pharisees and keepers of the law waiting for him to defiantly break another law.

But this woman chose to use her voice. She had nothing to lose because she was considered insignificant. Like a teenager being controlled and manipulated, acting out is the only way to get attention. She had been shouting for help from the disciples. Finally, she shouted to Jesus, “Lord help me!” and Jesus responds to her and the disciples “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

Jesus is now debating a woman in front of the crowd and the Pharisees and the disciples. Oh my! That acknowledgment of her in the eyes of the authorities is strike one on Jesus. He considers her argument and validates it. That’s strike two. He then changes course and tells her she has healed her daughter by using her voice humbly and courageously. He hits it out of the park. The disciples learn about humility, the crowd is stunned, and the Pharisees walk away like dogs.

Forget the dogs, puppies, Pharisees, disciples, and the rest of the crowd. The humility of Jesus allowed this woman to carry her voice and her well-reasoned response into the courtyard of power and dominion.

And that woman became known as Rosie the Riveter, “Si se puede!” And now you know the rest of the story! Just kidding, but you get the point.

She did not need the bread of inclusion, she needed only the crumbs of living bread, and it would be more than enough. I am sure she found that out when she got home to a calm loving daughter.

The message to me is this: If you consider yourself a follower of Jesus, a keeper of the moralistic law, a Supreme Court justice, or simply an onlooker, don’t mess with those who are considered “the least of these.”

Whether they have been designated by a government as Syrophoenicians or labeled by a religious group as “dogs” and “lost sheep,” they possess a power greater than anything this world has to offer: the friendship of God.

Be bold enough to use your voice. Because the “least of these”—cast out as orphans, homeless, widowed, nonbelievers, and, for sure, anyone considered a dog—may discover that their faith and humility have healed them. At least, that is what the man who changed his mind seems to say.