

## A RACIST RIDDLE

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**Text: Matthew 15:22–28**

Our text this morning is one of the more unsettling passages in the New Testament because Jesus makes a comment that, to our ears, sounds racist.

When Beth, Seth and I decided months ago that we would follow the lectionary texts this summer, I thought, “Oh, great, I love to dig deeper into the scripture.” I never imagined that the texts would prove to be so relevant for today. For here, now, in Minneapolis and for our country, there are messages for us. That is the beauty of our ancient texts: They are relevant if we are open to the message.

In our passage, a woman comes to Jesus because she wants his help, and, instead, she gets a riddle. Now, it may not sound like one of our riddles. We have riddles like: What goes up and never comes down? *Your age*. Or, what word becomes shorter when you add two letters to it? *Short*. Or, you cannot keep this until you have given it. *A promise*. Our riddles make us think and maybe laugh. In our text, the woman cries, “Help me!” And Jesus says something like, “What happens when you take the children’s food and throw it to a dog?” Huh? What kind of riddle is that? And did Jesus just call that woman . . . a dog?

At the very least, it sounds quite rude, if not incredibly racist. This woman is a Canaanite, so she is not an Israelite. Canaanites are people who lived in the modern-day areas of Israel, Palestine, Syria and Jordan, but they were polytheistic in their beliefs. Was the fact that she believed something different about God than Jesus a reason for name-calling? Jesus’ response implies that the woman and her people are like dogs.

Now for those of us who love our pets and know how most of the time they behave better than humans, this could be thought to be a compliment, but, in this cultural context, it isn’t. And it is more insulting than calling someone from Wisconsin a Cheesehead. No, this is the worst kind of name-calling, and I don’t think I need to spell it out for you. His comment insults and dehumanizes a desperate woman seeking the mental health of her daughter. Jesus is saying that Gentiles are second-class citizens. If you want to take this passage literally, Jesus’ statement is full of prejudice and ethnocentrism.

Why is this story included in our sacred text? I think for several reasons: First, this story forces us to encounter Jesus’ humanity. Being human means being embedded in a culture. It means growing up with a certain worldview. It means inheriting traditions and language and biases—biases that can be wrongheaded and hurtful and alienating, biases like treating women as second-class citizens and excluding certain people from the community of faith and the circle of those deserving compassion. Jesus was a human and he was brought up by humans. And while Jesus was somewhat radical in his association with women, he still had some preconceived ideas about his mission. He thought he would minister only to his people, the Jews.

The second reason may be that it gives us an opportunity to see that Jesus doesn’t cling to his prejudice. Jesus starts by asking a snide riddle, but then . . . Jesus listens. He listens and then does something

remarkable: He changes his mind! The hero of this story is not Jesus but the Canaanite woman. Jesus shows us in this story that inheriting bias is inevitable but holding onto it is a choice.

What can we learn from the Canaanite woman? The story begins by saying that this woman was shouting at Jesus and the disciples! That's not very ladylike. But she loved her child so much that she is willing to do anything: even get on her knees and beg for help. She is willing to get into a little trouble. How disappointing when from this holy man she receives a riddle, a joke, a cliché. But she is not to be stopped. She gets called a dog. She doesn't name-call back. She does not get defensive. She does not even try to refute what Jesus has said.

Rather, she uses her sense of humor. "All right, Jesus, so I'm a dog. Even a dog (and the word she uses is a small dog, a puppy), even a puppy has the right to hang around the table and catch the scraps that fall from the plates of the children. That's all I'm asking for: not equality, just the crumbs, just what the children do not want. I'm asking you to share with me just a little, tiny, tiny bit of your power."

Wow! What a comeback... and it works! And this makes sense, doesn't it? Because if we imagine that Jesus never lost an argument, never learned from anyone else, never changed his mind, what kind of person would he be?

Is this story relevant now? Absolutely! At some point in our lives, we all live on the margins, whether spiritually, physically, economically, emotionally, and we struggle with rejection or isolation. And then we live in a culture that encourages us to exclude the needs of those who are marginalized because we think they are to blame. They are not "like us," and so we separate ourselves from them.

This story is about borders, all kinds of borders: geographic, emotional, physical, cultural, racial and gender-based borders. In our story Jesus went to a place where it was mostly non-Jews. Physically and culturally he is in a strange place. It takes a foreign woman to remind him that humans create borders, not God. Humans alienate people by culture, religion, gender or race. Humans do this, not God. These borders are almost always based on fear or need to feel superior over another. These borders are about our insecurities.

The Canaanite woman pulls Jesus across the border from his humanity back into his divinity. Her words tear down the walls of separation. She has stopped Jesus in his tracks, interrupted him and offered him grace so that he could change his mind. She invited him to remember his true self.

What are our borders? It's easy to think about this literally. We look at photos of thousands little children at the southwest American border: children of desperate parents willing to risk it all, even the lives of those children, to improve their situation. But closer to home, some of us must deal with the borders of sexism and heterosexism, and all of us deal with racism. And then there are the invisible border struggles like illness, depression and addiction. What is your border?

How do we wrestle with conquering our internal borders that wall us away from others in need? We must continue to allow ourselves to be stopped in our tracks by the marginalized and to listen for that spark of the Divine within them. We must be open to that voice and to follow Jesus' mission-altering decision. We must listen to hear God calling us to encourage and to walk with those on the margins wherever and whenever we can and never be satisfied until there are no people on the margins!

I want to conclude by reading a poem by Jan Richardson, in the voice of the Canaanite woman, called "Stubborn Blessing":

*Don't tell me no.  
I have seen you  
feed the thousands,  
seen miracles spill*

*from your hands  
like water, like wine,  
seen you with circles  
and circles of crowds  
pressed around you  
and not one soul  
turned away.*

*Don't start with me.*

*I am saying  
you can close the door  
but I will keep knocking.  
You can go silent  
but I will keep shouting.  
You can tighten the circle  
but I will trace a bigger one  
around you,  
around the life of my child  
who will tell you  
no one surpasses a mother  
for stubbornness.*

*I am saying  
I know what you  
can do with crumbs  
and I am claiming mine,  
every morsel and scrap  
you have up your sleeve.  
Unclench your hand,  
your heart.  
Let the scraps fall  
like manna,  
like mercy  
for the life  
of my child,  
the life of  
the world.*

*Don't you tell me no.<sup>1</sup>*

The Canaanite woman's persistence not only made her daughter whole; it also showed Jesus the larger world he had come to listen to, to save and to heal.

We don't know how Jesus felt at losing this argument. But what's clear is that he recognized truth when he heard it. And he changed his mind and his behavior and . . . because of that . . . we are here. Let us be like the Canaanite woman, tenacious, hopeful and scrappy. Let us change the mind of this world! May it be so.

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<sup>1</sup>Jan Richardson, "Stubborn Blessing," *The Painted Prayerbook*, [http://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/08/11/stubborn-blessing/#.U\\_AB4bwiiUE](http://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/08/11/stubborn-blessing/#.U_AB4bwiiUE) (accessed August 19, 2020).