

A Space for Grace (Matthew 15. 21-28)

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There are a number of stories in the Gospels where Jesus is, allegedly, quite offensive to those he is speaking with. Consider his 'woe to the scribes and Pharisees' speech in Matt 23. He launches in with a scathing attack, calling them hypocrites, blind guides, a brood of vipers, murderers, and whitewashed tombs – caring about their outward appearance, but inwardly full of dead bones. In Luke's version of this tirade, it is even more offensive. In chapter 11, a Pharisee invites Jesus to dine with him, and he accepts, taking his place at the table. But he doesn't wash his hands. Provocative, perchance? It certainly provoked a response from the Pharisee, which then triggered Jesus' invective, at this man's house, around his table, to his face. An unsuspecting lawyer goes to the Pharisees' defence: 'Teacher, in saying this, you reproach us also'. Jesus then turns on the lawyers of his day, accusing them of loading people with burdens too hard to bear, and not righting the wrongs of their fathers who killed the prophets.

As we read these stories, we are not usually put off by them. We are with Jesus in calling out injustice, oppression and misguided ways. We recognise in him the prophet, calling his people back to their originating vision: the love of God and neighbour; living kindly, justly and humbly.

So, what are we to make of Jesus in this story of the Canaanite woman that we heard in tonight's reading? He is, allegedly, rude and offensive to her, but she has done nothing wrong. She has no power of leadership to influence others and lead them astray. She is a woman with a sick daughter pleading for help. What is going on here?

Let's take a closer look at the reading to see if there are any clues there. Leading up to this story in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus had been teaching in parables as he moved around the country, then visits Nazareth where they had known him since childhood and were offended by his presumptions of authority. So, 'he could not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief' (13:58). He then hears about the death of John the Baptist and 'he withdrew from there to a lonely place apart' (14:13). But the crowds find him, and he has pity on them. Thus follows the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. He tries again for some quiet time, dismissing the crowds and sending his disciples to the other side of the lake. He spends the day alone, in prayer, on the mountain. But a storm has come up, and we have another miracle story – Jesus walking on the water and calming the storm. But a different storm hits him on the other side. Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem confront him about not adhering strictly to the law, and while he turns that into a teaching opportunity, he knows the authorities are gathering against him.

And so, we come to the story of the Canaanite woman, beginning with: 'Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon'. Other translations say he 'withdrew' to that district. He is looking, again, for rest and prayer. He is carrying grief, rejection and a growing awareness of the dangers before him. The story continues: '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'. The disciples urge him to send her away because she keeps shouting, but Jesus, answering his disciples, says, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel'. He doesn't send her away, but he gives the grounds by which she could be sent away. She is beyond what he sees his mission to be.

The woman seems to hear this, and she comes and kneels before him, saying simply, 'Lord, help me'. Jesus remains in the conversation, perhaps discerning where it might go, but holds his line: 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'. Offensive as that might have been, she has a come-back line: 'Yes, Lord, yet

even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table'. Jesus recognises her great faith and heals her daughter.

There has been much biblical and theological scholarship on this text, especially on Jesus' limited view of his mission and his resultant reference to her as a 'dog', not one of the children. The New Testament scholar, Alan Cadwallader, for example, wrote his thesis on this story, in its Markan version.¹ He looked for clues behind the text, other literature at the time, that drew on animals as metaphors for human behaviour. In, dogs, mice and chimpanzees, for examples, were used as symbols for people, but were not flattering. He concluded that whatever way you look at it, Jesus' reference to her as a dog cannot be interpreted as other than offensive. She rose above it, and Cadwallader shines attention on the woman's love for her daughter, beyond the words of the text, in their flesh-and-blood lives that drew the healing out of Jesus.

Feminist readings have pointed to the spiritedness of the woman, her wit and persistence, which in the end expanded Jesus' view of his mission. This woman had agency and impact in what was being revealed to us in Christ. Others argue that Jesus was enacting a parable for his disciples, putting to her the dominant view so that she might counter it and receive her unexpected blessing. This does not lessen the offence, however. It is not great pastoral care for Jesus to insult a desperate and vulnerable woman to make a point to his disciples.

All these readings, and more, offer some light on the text and have a contribution to make. However, for this Reflection, I found myself prompted to look at it from another angle, not in competition with other ways but in addition to. For here we all are, in the hall and on Zoom, meeting as a contemplative church, schooled in contemplative practices and ways. What might a contemplative reading of the story of the Canaanite woman look like, and what might that yield for our understanding of God and Christian living?

¹ Alan H. Cadwallader, *Beyond the Word of a Woman: Recovering the Bodies of the Syrophoenician Women*. Hindmarsh, SA: ATF Press, 2008.

Two things came to mind when I thought about this. The first is that contemplative ways lead us eventually into the unitive vision, where we see that all things belong in an interrelated whole.² We are not individuals who have relationships here and there. We are constituted by our relations. Who we are, and who we are becoming, comes from our relations with each other including our histories, cultures, politics and natural environment. Our *inter-relations* matter for the health of the whole.

So how might this shed some light on the story of the Canaanite woman? Well, if reality is inter-relational, so is revelation. We can sometimes think of the revelation of God in Christ as a one-way communication, in which we could do nothing to help ourselves. It is seen as a flow from God, through Christ, to us as passive recipients. This view is hierarchical, or patriarchal, with a clear structure and line of command.

But what if revelation happens in the in-between spaces, in the interrelations of Christ with others, including his Jewish tradition, and the history and politics of his day? His response to these inter-relationships reveal something of what God is like, in human form, and what God requires of us.

It is interesting that in most of the miracle stories in the Gospels, Jesus does not initiate the healing. They arise out of an interaction. Blind Bartimaeus calls out as Jesus is walking by. A woman, unable to get his attention because of the crowds, reaches out and touches the hem of his garment. Jairus approaches Jesus on behalf of his sick daughter. Mary and Martha send word about Lazarus. And when interactions are closed, as in Nazareth, he could not do mighty works there because of their unbelief.

At this point I would like to bring in the second insight that came to me about the contemplative way, and that is: let love be your guide. Contemplation is not just looking at something thoughtfully. It is looking at something with love, through God's

² John Main, *Silence and Stillness in Every Season*, New York, Continuum, 1998, p. 94. See 'interbeing' in Thich Nhat Han, *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*, pp. 95-96. Also, Richard Rhor, 'nothing stands alone': <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/2022-daily-meditations/>

eyes, and being attentive to what is revealed in that practice. It is looking at a situation *for* the love that is already at work there, for that is where we will find God.³

Now, I like to read crime novels, and sometimes the detective says, ‘Follow the money’, and then you will solve the mystery of this crime. I am saying, ‘follow the love’, and then we will solve the mystery of where God is at work in the world. In our one, inter-related world, the love of God and of others is the same reality, and love needs certain conditions in which to thrive.

Let’s return to Jesus and the Canaanite woman to see what these insights reveal. We are looking at the interrelations between them. Jesus has just withdrawn, again, for some rest and prayer. He has reached a limit. And this woman comes shouting at him. He doesn’t answer, but doesn’t close her down, either. Then he states another limit – that his mission is to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. Maybe he was testing her, or even putting his own assumptions to the test. Or maybe he was all out of love at that point.

When she pleads with him, he claims it is not fair. And he uses this metaphor of a meal. Should he take the children of Israel’s food and throw it to the dogs – those who do not have a place at the table? At this point, the woman reminds me of Jacob, wrestling with the angel for a blessing: ‘Even the dogs eat the crumbs from under the master’s table’. Give me a few crumbs and I will be satisfied. Jesus remains open to where this conversation is going, for possibilities that might emerge, and he let love be his guide. He could hear in her words, and see in her face, the deep and desperate love she had for her daughter, and that she was reaching out to him, from beyond the House of Israel.

Somehow, out of this interaction, a blessing was found. As I considered this text from a contemplative view, I found myself becoming more aware of my interactions with others. Was I leaving some space for grace, even beyond the limits of my resources and imagination? Was I being vulnerable enough to let love be my

³ ‘Let love be your guide’ is from Eph 5:2. John Main in *Silence and Stillness in Every Season*, talks about the work of meditation as ‘this work of love’ (p. 217), and the purpose of meditation as ‘being in the presence of love’ (p. 325).

guide, wherever it would take me? And what agency might I have to wrestle a blessing out of an encounter, for myself or others – to right a wrong, take a step towards peace, enable some healing or kindness?

These questions can equally be applied to our larger picture inter-relations – our histories and political situations in which we are all embedded and implicated. Our inter-relations matter for the health of the whole.

What also showed up for me was that, although we are limited and culture-bound, God's work of love is inexhaustible and limitless, if only we would allow it.

Amen