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Matthew 15:10-28

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***10Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: 11it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” 12Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” 13He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. 14Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” 15But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” 16Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? 17Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? 18But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. 19For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. 20These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”]***

***21Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22Just 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.” 23But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying,*** ***“Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” 24He answered,*** ***“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” 25But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” 26He answered,*** ***“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” 27She said,*** ***“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” 28Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.***

In the early 16th century, Dutch theologian and philosopher, Erasmus, wrote a satirical essay about the church, society, men, women, indulgences, etc, called “In Praise of Folly” in which he originated the phrase, “Women. You can’t live with them; you can’t live without them.”1,2,3

This came as a surprise to me because my limited knowledge about the 16th century world and the writings of that time in history left me with the assumption that Erasmus was a quality writer and not one to write something so crass.

While the phrase is used these days with humor to describe the uncanny love/hate relationship we have with many of life’s categories this phrase is what came to mind after reading today’s text. Because it also came as a surprise to me that Jesus would act so dismissively toward someone coming to him for help.

This is not the first time a woman has played a central role in a scene about Jesus’ ministry. But this is the only time in all the gospels when Jesus ignored someone’s cry.4

Why would Jesus do this?

To find out a little bit about what was happening at the time, we need to go back to the beginning of chapter 15. If you remember, Jesus was upset by the death of his cousin John the Baptist so he tried to go away for some quiet time but the crowds followed him. He fed them and healed them. Then he sent the disciples away in a boat while he himself went away alone to pray. He returned to his disciples and calmed a storm and walked on the water toward them to teach them that their experiences of God were just as important as their temple experiences of God. News of Jesus was spreading, his popularity was spreading and in the beginning of Chapter 15, the pharisees and scribes came to Jesus asking him questions. Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 2“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” 3He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?”

Our text today catches Jesus in the middle of new conflicts about the role of traditional practices and “God’s will.” Jesus answers their question about washing hands in terms of the laws about defilement. Jesus says that if you want to talk about defilement, we don’t need to talk about our hands and our food. We can talk about what people say and what people do. He explains that what goes *into* our mouths is biology, human bodily concerns. But what comes *out of* our mouth is beyond biology and has a greater impact, because it involves spirituality. What comes out of our mouth tells people what is in our hearts and closest to our real feelings.

Having set up the mindset of the recent events, we expect to look very closely at the interactions that follow. Just as many of the scenes from our last few weeks of scripture turned out to be examples of a preceding parable, Jesus interactions with the people in the last half of the text is also an example of the preceding discussion about defilement, cleanliness, and the role of tradition and God’s will.

Jesus left the place where he was with the Pharisees and scribes and crossed over into the region of Tyre and Sidon. There wouldn’t have been a clear border between these areas, but generally the areas of Tyre and Sidon were outside the towns of the Israelites and assumed to be mostly gentiles and pagans. Commentators have called this location Ceaserville, Paganland, and the borderlands.

Maybe Jesus left where he was, thinking he was on his own time, getting a little down time from the work of healing and feeding and spreading his message. Off the clock. Whatever the reason, Jesus seemed to slip back into some of the old traditions where women weren’t acknowledged and blessings were reserved for those who deserved it by being from the right family, having the right background or having enough money. Why else would a man sensitive enough to know when power had left him when someone just touched the hem of his robe, suddenly not listen to the cry of this woman?

First Jesus ignored her. She was shouting – not just once, but over and over again. “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” The ancient Greek grammar police tell me that it was the kind of verb that describes continuance. For example, the man ran and is still running. She was shouting and is still shouting. So much so that the disciples, also short on lessons of inclusive hospitality, basically wanted Jesus to call her off! “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us,” they said. Desperate to make Jesus look good, I want to think that Jesus didn’t ignore her earlier, he just didn’t realize she was there; now the disciples bring her to the attention of Jesus. But Jesus also slips back into his tradition of only coming on behalf of the lost souls of the Israelites and no one else. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Ugh, I don’t like that Jesus either.

But this woman stops him cold. “Oh no you don’t. I know who you are.” She came and knelt. She assumes a posture of worship, and begs again. She has called him Lord, she has recognized his Davidic lineage. Maybe she is reminding Jesus that he’s not allowed to be a regular guy, he is the one to be worshipped. This is a statement of faith for her.

I don’t know how or why he could do it, but he says these terrible words to her -- “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

This poor woman, coming to Jesus because she has heard about his miracles of feeding and healing and she believes in him and his power to heal her daughter. Jan Richardson has a great poem called “Stubborn Blessing” about a woman saying “Don’t tell me no.” and the power of a mother’s love for her child. Richardson writes,

“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’m 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.

…

Don’t you tell me no.”5

The Cannanite woman can also be described with the words “Nevertheless she persisted,” as she stays with Jesus’ analogy about children’s food and dogs by responding, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

I imagine Jesus coming out of his distracted self, perhaps realizing that he has fallen back into thoughtless tradition instead of being the messenger of what is New, and is startled into the present moment again by her words. Not only did she not go away, she talked back, held her own, met the moment with equal power of her own.

A very example of what came out of Jesus’ mouth coming from his distracted heart defiling the situation, and what came out of the woman’s mouth coming from her determined mother’s love heart.

It’s one thing to wonder what the lesson is for us, from this woman. It’s another thing to be awkward about Jesus being portrayed in such a bad light. Was this just a rhetorical device on the part of Matthew? Was it a made up story to illumine the lesson discussed prior? How can Jesus, the perfect all-knowing human, fall short – and then why would Matthew then write about it?

There have been whole essays written to defend Jesus, and other essays written about the literary nature of this gospel. I find it enlightening to think that part of Jesus understanding us in every situation, includes those situations where we were wrong, we stayed engaged, and changed our mind. I think the human Jesus learned from his experiences just like we do. I think the human Jesus To think that the one we worship and come to with our petitions, is willing to listen to our shouting, stay with us in our refusal to go away, and engage in an open minded way with what we have to say, is really pretty cool. I’m sure there is an ancient Greek word for “cool.” It is a far cry from God the far away guy in the sky who sets up rules for us to follow and is only there to judge us and punish us. The loving living God we worship is not distant, loves us constantly and remains with us.

There is much in this text that conflicts with Church traditions and doctrines throughout the last 2,000 years among every denomination as it was created. It’s risky, but the right thing to do to question things that don’t make sense. Christianity is big enough and strong enough to withstand any of our confrontations or questions about it. My Christianity might not be the same as my neighbors Christianity, but all of it should be based in the love of Christ and the love of God, for us. The Canaanite woman proves there is no argument that can keep the love and blessings of God from anyone.

Amen.

1<https://internetpoem.com/desiderius-erasmus/quotes/women-can-t-live-with-them-can-t-live-without-them-55320/>

2Tracy, James D.. "Erasmus". Encyclopedia Britannica, 8 Jul. 2023, [https://www.britannica.com/biography/Erasmus-Dutch-humanist. Accessed 19 August 2023](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Erasmus-Dutch-humanist.%20Accessed%2019%20August%202023).

3<https://study.com/learn/lesson/praise-of-folly-erasmus-summary-analysis.html>

4 <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2017-08-14/matthew-1510-20-21-28/>

5 <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/08/11/stubborn-blessing/>