

September 5, 2021

A Puzzling Scene

Scripture: **Proverbs 22:1-2;8-9;22-23; Mark 7:24-30**; Henry Nouwen *Self-Rejection*

Imagine this scene, my friends:

An Afghan woman walks into the church. She is obviously desperate, and she calls out, "Pastor, help me! My daughter is very sick, help me, please!"

I ignore her.

The Afghan woman keeps on shouting, louder this time; "Help me, please, my daughter! I wouldn't ask for myself, but for her. Please, Pastor, think of the child!"

Then someone in the congregation shouts at her, "Be quiet!" And someone else says, "Zip it, lady!", and a third says, "Pastor, do something! Get rid of her, will you! She's interrupting the service. We can't learn about loving God and our neighbor with her here."

I say, "My green card only lets me serve Americans. They must have priority in everything."

She comes forward and kneels before me. "Please, Pastor, help me."

I say, "What I have is for true Americans. It's not right to take bread from the children of God and give it to foreign dogs."

So the Afghan woman says, "Of course, Pastor, but even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

And to this I suddenly say, "Lady, you clearly have great faith. I'll do what you want. I'll help your daughter." And then, at last, I do.

I tell you, I wouldn't have this pulpit long if a representative of the Association were here to see that horrible scene. Such blatant prejudice would mean my dismissal, for sure, as well it ought to. And they would send in counselors immediately to speak to a congregation that could ignore a woman in such great need and just want the pastor to shut her up so he can get on with the sermon. It's just so wrong, it's unbelievable – that a congregation would be that desperate to hear a sermon! Something's not right there, believe me!

But isn't that just what we heard today? Isn't this just what Jesus and the disciples do to the Syrophenician woman? It's horrible to listen to, and we don't want Jesus to act like this and speak like this. The disciples are always screwing up, so we're not surprised at *their* wrong attitude, but Jesus, our Jesus, acting like this? It's shocking. It's so shocking that some scholars like Eugene Boring have suggested that Jesus didn't really say or do this, that it was Mark and his pro-Jewish community that made this up and put it into Jesus' mouth.

Scholars say things like this, but the problem is that we have no evidence that the early church actually ever actually did that, taking their own ideas and putting them into Jesus' mouth.

In fact, the evidence is clearly going the other way - that the early church was very careful to distinguish between what Jesus said and what a church leader said. Paul, for example, at one point says, "The Lord, not I, says....," and then in another spot says the opposite, "I, not the Lord, say"

So probably the story does go back to Jesus and the disciples. That just makes it worse! We had better do some more thinking about it, and some more study. Let's look more closely. We don't see what's happening here as clearly as the ancients would. Ancient society was an honor-shame culture. They believed that there was only a finite amount of honor in the world, and if you got more of it, someone else got less. You win honor at others' expense when you see through their tricks and outwit them, or when you get the best of the other person in an argument. In that society, if Jesus were to lose an argument, it would be shameful, and he would lose honor. If he were to lose an argument to a foreigner, that would be worse, and he would lose more honor, and if he were to lose an argument to a woman, that would be the worst, most shameful thing that could happen. In ancient society, it would be an honor disaster. People would never stop talking about it. We don't live in an honor-shame society, so we don't see how utterly humiliating this scene is to Jesus.

Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus never loses. Not to the Pharisees, not to the Sadducees, not to the Teachers of the Law. Never, he never loses. Only here. To this Gentile Syrophenician woman. While Jesus' *words and actions* are shocking to us, it's his *loss of the argument* that would be so shocking to the ancients. It's so shocking that no one would ever forget an incident like that, it was so dishonoring to Jesus. If the early church had cared about sugar-coating things, they never would have put this story into the Gospels. But, apparently, they cared about the truth more, and about what Jesus was trying to teach them.

You see, I think Jesus purposely threw the fight, that he was representing the disciples' attitudes and showing them, graphically, how wrong they were. He was willing to lose honor in order to create an event they would never forget, and to teach them a lesson they would always remember. To see why that's even plausible, we need to look at the context. Too often people take just one little section of the text and look at it, and forget to look at what comes before and what comes after. What comes before in Mark, is a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees about the food purity laws. That doesn't seem too relevant yet, but let's have a look.

It may sound familiar, because we heard about it last week! Jesus claims that the heart of Judaism is keeping the Law, and the heart of the Law is the Ten Commandments, which the Pharisees are ignoring in carrying out their traditions. Their faith in the God of Israel isn't leading to doing what's right. Instead, the Pharisees were all caught up in food laws and purity codes. These dealt with matters on the outside, but paid no attention to matters on the inside, to matters of the heart, like evil thoughts, false testimony, slander. These things, the inner things, Jesus says, these are what make a person unclean, not the food that goes into their body. Jesus quotes Isaiah to bring home his point: the Pharisees were honoring God with their lips, but their hearts were far from God. In other words, he called them hypocrites, people play acting at being religious, and there's nothing more sanctimonious and perverse than a person play acting at being religious.

This dispute about ceremonial cleanness is really a dispute about who gets to participate in the worship of God. People who wash their hands or people who wash their souls. The dispute gets so bad that Jesus has to leave Jewish territory and go into Gentile territory. It's here, in the regions of Tyre and Sidon - where the great enemy of Israel, the Philistines, used to live - that Jesus meets the Syrophenician woman. A Syrophenician was a person descended from the early inhabitants of the land there, and not a part of the tribes of Israel. So Jesus and the disciples are meeting a Gentile woman in Gentile territory, where there was a long history of animosity between the Jewish people

and the people of that area. In general, Jewish people believed, and the Scripture says, that they were the chosen people of God. Some believed that they were chosen to show God's way to the world, and to be witnesses to the greatness of God for all people. Others, maybe most, believed that they were chosen to be superior to the other peoples of the world, that God cared most about them, and not about other nations. This attitude of national superiority was deeply ingrained in Israel. We're number one! Isra-el, Isra-el!

Okay, now we have enough background to get started. How does this help us move forward? Is Jesus just playing into the Jewish prejudice against the Gentiles when he at first refuses this woman's request? Or is something else going on? Some scholars do think that Jesus bears a typical male Jewish attitude towards women, that they should be ignored, and towards Gentiles, that they are some kind of lesser humanity. They think that this woman brings Jesus up short, calls him on his racist attitude, and outduels him in verbal argument, so that he concedes her point and does what she wants.

Now if Jesus bears a typical Jewish attitude towards women here, it would be the first time as his attitude toward women is elsewhere portrayed as startlingly unusual. He treats them as full humans and worthy of respect. And if he had no concern for the Gentiles, he must for the first time in his life have been unaware of something in Scripture, namely what the prophet Isaiah said: one day the Gentiles will come streaming to the Temple of God to worship him there alongside the Jews. Now, we can be sure that Jesus knows Isaiah well. He quoted from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth to start his ministry, and he just quoted from Isaiah again in his dispute with the Pharisees, just before this encounter with the Syrophoenician woman. So it's extremely likely - practically a certainty, in fact - that he knew the text from Isaiah about the Gentiles part in God's coming kingdom as well.

Yes, indeed, something very strange is happening. By having nothing to do with the Canaanite woman, Jesus seems to be upholding the purity laws that he just spoke *against* with such force that he had to leave Jewish territory. By calling her and her people dogs, he seems to be slandering her with a racist attitude from an impure heart, the very thing, the *very* thing that he had just spoken out against so vehemently. Unless we are to charge Jesus with rank hypocrisy, he must be doing something here that is different from what it appears to be on the surface, and I think that is, in fact, the case. I think Jesus is using this situation to drive home his previous points: what matters is not what a person is on the outside, it's who that person is on the inside. It's clear from the disciples' attitudes towards the woman that they didn't get what Jesus meant in his prior teaching and needed radical intervention.

How do we know the disciples were clueless and not getting it? They told Jesus so in the scene prior to this meeting with the Syrophoenician woman! The disciples are asking Jesus what he meant with his teaching about purity and the heart. Jesus actually says to them, "Are you still so slow to understand?" and tries to spell it out for them. But they still don't get it. What happens in his encounter with the Syrophoenician woman is a clear *physical and dramatic* complement to Jesus' *verbal* explanation. Jesus shows the disciples an attitude that must be changed, their attitude of excluding some people from God's concern, and then changes it in front of them! This is much better than helping the woman straight off and then trying to explain to the disciples that their attitudes towards her were wrong. By acting as he does, Jesus brings out all their prejudices and displays them before them, and then confronts those prejudices by praising this Gentile woman and her great faith.

This, we might note, is in strong contrast to his previous remarks to the Pharisees, that they were lacking in great faith. In other words, he puts this Gentile woman one up on those Jews who thought

of themselves as most pure. Jesus puts forward an extremely memorable scene here, in which he shows that the Messiah did not come only for the people of Israel but for the Gentiles as well, for all people in other words. It was a scene the disciples would never forget.

Even in his address to the woman, Jesus subverts common Jewish prejudice. Jews often called the Gentiles “dogs,” but Jesus here uses a diminutive and calls them “puppies.” Some scholars dismiss this as irrelevant, but I think it acts to further undercut the prejudices Jesus is acting against. Jesus is mocking the insult by making a joke of it. In case you were to think that I am just making this up, that Jesus really isn’t acting to teach the disciples an important lesson about the inclusion of the Gentiles in God’s plan and God’s kingdom, let me point to the text which comes almost immediately after this encounter. It’s the feeding of the four thousand. The feeding of the *four* thousand? Isn’t it the feeding of the *five* thousand? No, it’s not. That event, where Jesus fed five thousand men and many others on five loaves of bread and two fish happened just *before* our text for today begins. That act was part of Jesus’ dramatic demonstration that God would take care of the people, that God would feed them in the coming kingdom, in the same way that God had fed the people of Israel with manna in the desert in the time of Moses. That event happened in Jewish territory.

Now here he is repeating that action in Gentile territory with seven loaves and a few small fish. Rather than just the crumbs of bread under the table of the chosen children, the “dogs” are getting hand-fed loaves of bread in the very same way that the children were fed. Jesus gives the bread to his disciples to distribute, so that Jewish men are handing out bread to Gentiles, just in case the disciples still don’t get the point. With this second feeding of the multitude, Jesus puts the Gentiles on the same footing as the Jewish people. Both will be fed by God in the coming kingdom. Jesus’ actions once again undercut the idea that the Gentiles are second class creations of God, that they are only fit to get the crumbs of the Jewish people. Instead they, too, will receive loaves of bread from God. Though, just like the Messiah, it will come from the Jewish people.

For us, this parable, which seemed to be a story of exclusion, has turned into a powerful story of inclusion in God’s kingdom. Though we Gentiles were once outsiders, we are so no longer. We are welcomed at the table to receive bread from God in his kingdom. But it is also a reminder that God doesn’t play favorites in the world, doesn’t have just one country or one people, or even one type of person, that God cares about, as the Jewish people tended to believe. No, God has a heart for all nations and all peoples, for anyone who comes to God with a willing heart. The labels we put on people on the outside don’t matter at all. It’s what is on the inside that counts the most. It’s the faith on the inside that makes a person clean or unclean, not something on the outside at all.

May we never forget the time that Jesus lost, and the whole world won. Come now and receive the bread and the wine, whoever you are, as full children of God and followers of Jesus. Amen