

“Other No More”

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8, Psalm 67;  
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:10-28

August 16, 2020  
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This passage from Matthew starts with Jesus offending the Pharisees. These Pharisees were supposed to be the people of Israel who were people of great faith, and yet here he is offending them, telling them what comes out of their mouths is defiling them. He then goes on to describe to the disciples what is coming out, what is doing the defiling, the evil intentions and so forth.

Then they leave and go to a different place. They were in a place that must have been central to the Jewish faith of the time, with all those Pharisees. So, they were in a very Jewish place; then, it says, they went to the region of Tyre and Sidon. They go somewhere that is Gentile, that is other, that is different.

As Jesus and his disciples enter into that region, they are walking along a road and a woman comes up and starts shouting out to Jesus, “Lord, Son of David, heal my daughter.” This woman is breaking all kinds of rules, all kinds of boundaries she is supposed to keep. She is not supposed to come herself as a woman. She should send a male in her place, which suggests that perhaps she doesn’t have a male to speak for her and thus is likely to be somebody who is very poor. Women couldn’t own property, so if she had no one to speak for her, who could own for her? So she comes as a woman, speaking to this group of men, but it doesn’t stop there.

She comes as a sinner; her daughter has a demon. That’s enough for the disciples to know that she is a sinner and on the outs with their religion. She is certainly a Gentile, not a Jew, so she’s got a religious difference with them because she is coming from a different region. It says she’s a Canaanite, not a Jew. The interesting thing about calling her a Canaanite is that there is no territory called Canaan during the time of Jesus. Mark calls her a Syrophenician woman, which is more correct. It’s more the region that she’s in. But Matthew calls her a Canaanite. The Canaanites were the traditional enemies of the Israelites. Matthew is suggesting she represents the enemy of the Israelites.

So here she is, breaking another rule, a boundary between them, by coming and trying to speak to them. She’s breaking all these different rules and boundaries that are supposed to be set up to protect those who want to be pure and want to stay within their group and then can know who they can dismiss, who they can denigrate, who they can devalue, and perhaps not even consider as fully human.

It’s interesting to me that the disciples don’t come to Jesus and say any of this. Perhaps they remember what he said about what comes out of one’s mouth. They simply say, “She’s bothering us because she’s shouting at us. She’s not coming in the appropriate way.” It’s a fairly innocent way of trying to get Jesus to dismiss the woman.

A person coming with great need simply dismissed, and in dismissing, denigrated and devalued.

How often in our own lives do we find ways to allow our own boundaries and our own ways of seeing differences make people into others? How often do we use something like their tone, the way they talk to us, or the way they look to dismiss them? They're not culturally appropriate, so I'm not going to pay as much attention to them. Or, they are poor, so I don't have to pay the attention to them. Or, whatever way we other someone else. Certainly, our country has a tradition of othering those who are people of color.

What does Jesus do at this point? It's one of these real conundrums of scripture because it seems that Jesus tells the disciples, "I came to be the savior for the Jews." Right there, he's recognizing that she's crossing another boundary. She's suggesting that he's not just the savior for the Jews. When she calls him Lord and asks him to heal her daughter, she's asking him to show that he's savior not only for the Jews, but for her. She's asking him to bring healing to her in her culture, in her place.

Jesus lays out the expectation of the day. The Messiah is for the Jews. It's interesting when she comes close he doesn't dismiss her as the disciples had invited him to do, urged him to do, wished he would do. Instead, he enters into a conversation with her. Right there Jesus begins to break the boundary as well. What Rabbi is going to talk to a woman? He might talk to one of his students and have the student talk to the woman, but a great rabbi talking to a woman? Here he begins to do that. And while we are in a conundrum about whether Jesus believes what he's saying, perhaps he's just testing the disciples and seeing if they can see past what he's laying bare—he is describing the prejudice of their time, the expectations that they hold, the ways they have othered this woman, the way they have set those boundaries up.

We wonder at what he says to her. He says, "I came to the children of Israel. The dogs don't deserve the food of the children." That feels like a very coarse statement. If the word for "dog" there were "cur" it would feel even worse. I hadn't realized it before, but the word that is used there is not the main word for dog. It's the word for little dog, or the dog that is a pet, or sometimes it's the word for puppy. Jesus, in that way, suggests that she's in the master's house. At the same time, he is laying bare the perspective of the day that their enemies are dogs. They are not as valuable.

It's interesting that the woman's reaction to that is to recognize that she has an in. She says, "I don't care. If you're from God and I can get a crumb from you, that's what I want because I know a crumb from God is better than a piece of bread from anyone else."

Jesus looks at her and, whether he believed what he was saying or whether he was testing the disciples, at that point he pays attention to her. He says to her, "Woman, you have great faith." In that moment he heals her daughter, showing that he is a savior

for more than just his ethnic group. He shows that he is a savior at least regionally, and I think we know now he is showing his healing is for all.

One of the amazing things he does for her is to tell her she is a person of great faith. Think about the contrast of where we just were when we were with the Pharisees. They were supposed to be the people of great faith, the men of great faith, but Jesus calls them hypocrites. In contrast, at the end of this passage is this woman who has broken all those boundaries, who has taken the energy to come to Jesus and ask for help, who has shown her faith. She is the woman with great faith. She is the person of great faith.

Instead of inviting people to spend time with the Pharisees whose lips defile, Jesus is inviting them to spend time with this woman because if somebody has great faith, you want to spend time with them. You want to learn from them. You want to understand how they came to that faith and how they can encourage your faith. Perhaps he's suggesting that we will find faith in unexpected places. If we really want to learn to have great faith perhaps we need to look at those very people we other in our lives and see the great faith in their lives.

I know in my travels I have encountered that very thing. I have encountered people who have very little, who by most standards don't deserve a lot of attention, who wouldn't be the people who are listened to, and yet I've been blessed. I've seen great faith. And it is their great faith that has encouraged my faith.

Jesus, in Matthew 5, suggests that we are to love our enemies. Here is their enemy coming to them, and the disciples want to send that enemy away. Jesus listens, attends, recognizes, loves. And perhaps he models for us how to have eyes to see, and ears to hear, and hearts to care for those we thought were other. Amen.