

Wake Up and Learn

This morning's passage from Matthew is among my least favorite in the Gospels. That's not to say that I enjoy the gruesome descriptions of Jesus's Passion that we read at Holy Week every year. I'm always grateful for Jesus's sacrifice on our behalf and sickened by the ugly human behavior that made his sacrifice necessary. From Pilate and Herod to the Roman soldiers who flogged Jesus, crowned him with thorns, mocked him in the streets as he struggled with his cross, and gambled for his clothing, too many of the people involved in our Lord's crucifixion were appallingly, needlessly vicious. Maybe they all thought they had a job to do, but there was no reason for them to take such pleasure in it. Gratuitous cruelty always makes me a little ill.

That may be why Jesus's conversation with the Canaanite woman sits so badly with me. Here we have a Gentile who publicly hails Jesus as the Lord and Son of the House of David, something that even his disciples have yet to do. She comes humbly, begging Jesus not to grant her wealth, fame, or position, but to exorcise a demon that's tormenting her daughter. It's the kind of thing that Jesus can do in his sleep, but he initially ignores her frantic cries for help. When her shouting annoys the disciples and they ask Jesus to send her away, he replies that he was sent "only to the lost sheep of Israel." His words seem to assure the disciples that he won't waste his precious powers on someone whom they hold in contempt. When the woman kneels at his feet, still begging him to heal her child, Jesus doesn't grant her request or gently refuse. Instead, he withholds his help and refers to her daughter as a dog. It's a breathtaking display of nastiness, and so totally unlike him that I can't help wondering who this supercilious son of a fallen angel is and what in heaven's name he's done with our Savior.

Theologians have struggled for centuries to make sense of this passage. They sometimes defend Jesus's uncharacteristic cruelty by scoffing at those of us who are confused and upset by

his words. I'm not mildly troubled by what Jesus says to the Canaanite woman; I'm horrified. That she dares to give him a snappy retort tells me that she's clever and courageous, determined to help her child no matter the cost. That Jesus relents and heals her daughter may satisfy those who uncritically applaud whatever he does, but it doesn't do much for me.

As Bible scholar Douglas R. A. Hare points out, theologians typically interpret Jesus's distressing behavior in three ways. The first treats this episode as fiction, written for conservative Jewish Christians who opposed the mission to the Gentiles. It's possible. Matthew and Mark, whose Gospels were written primarily for Hebrew audiences, tell this story. Luke, whose Gospel is intended for both Jewish and Gentile readers, doesn't mention it at all. But I'm reluctant to assume that the Gospels were concocted without reference to things Jesus actually said and did. Even if Luke chose to omit this story from his Gospel, that doesn't mean it didn't happen.

The second interpretation tries to soften Jesus's words, arguing that he was just testing the Canaanite woman's faith. That's also possible, but out of character. When people came to him for healing, Jesus was kind, even solicitous. I can't think of another instance where he spoke so harshly to anyone who sincerely sought his help.

The third interpretation accepts the story as told. Jesus was just a Hebrew man of his time, a male chauvinist and bigoted against Gentiles until the Canaanite woman's cleverness wins him over and persuades him to broaden his mission. It's an interesting theory but, again, out of character. Women held prominent positions among his followers, so Jesus wasn't a sexist. He healed a Roman centurion's son seven chapters back, so his mission to the children of Israel didn't prevent him from healing Gentiles. There has to be something else going on here.

The answer may lie in Jesus's earlier comments about defilement. The Pharisees complain that the disciples don't wash their hands before eating. When Jesus tells the crowd that

it's what comes out of the mouth, not what goes into it, that defiles a person, the disciples worry that he might have offended the powerful religious authorities. Jesus explains that what goes into the mouth innocently passes through the body and into the sewer. But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, the place where human evil lurks. Hateful words spoken from an evil heart defile the speaker far more than eating with unwashed hands ever could.

My theory is that, when Jesus finishes explaining, the disciples look at him like twelve deer in the Biblical equivalent of headlights. They don't get what he tells them, so Jesus decides to show them. The Canaanite woman presents the perfect teaching opportunity. The disciples loathe her people, and her shouting to get Jesus's attention has already annoyed them. When Jesus assures them that he was sent for the lost children of Israel, he may be drawing them deeper into their sense of superiority. Then, when he rejects and insults the Canaanite woman as they would, he shows them *exactly* how ugly their prejudice is. I like to imagine Jesus winking at the Canaanite woman before throwing his insults over one shoulder so the disciples can't fail to overhear them. I hope his cruel words shock them into seeing that bigotry has no place in the Kingdom of God. I pray that, when the Canaanite woman answers back, she knows it's all a ruse. And I'm confident that, when Jesus praises her faith and heals her daughter, the Canaanite woman catches a glimpse of the loving, compassionate Savior whom I happily follow.

It's an unfortunate fact of human nature that we tend to discriminate against those we've abused. It's a way to rationalize our cruelty and mitigate our shame. The Hebrew Scriptures tell that Adonai helped Joshua's army drive the Canaanites from their land so his chosen people could claim it. If God did that, the Canaanites must have deserved it, right? The disciples likely thought it only right to despise the remaining Canaanite people as idol-worshipping Gentiles whose very existence offended their God. Or at least they did until Jesus taught them better.

Too many in the 21st century try to excuse our prejudices the same way. So, if indigenous people are “filthy savages,” it was okay to drive them from their land, force them into reservations, and destroy their culture, right? If Black people are “inferior,” it wasn’t criminal to enslave them, brutalize them, and make racism the foundation of a culture that oppresses their descendants to this day, correct? If God made women subordinate to men, isn’t it natural to batter them into submission? If LGBTQIA+ people are “degenerates,” doesn’t God want us to beat them up until they foreswear their “unnatural” ways? And if the Hebrews murdered Jesus, don’t modern Jews deserve all the violence that antisemites can inflict? *Of course not.*

Let me be clear: hatred has no place in our hearts, in our houses of worship, or in the Kingdom of God. Violence and discrimination are never acceptable. And, as Jesus so clearly shows the disciples, bigoted slurs aren’t okay, either. By that, I don’t just mean referring to other people by those nasty names your parents taught you never to use in public. I also mean sending out dog whistles like offensive T-shirt slogans, hateful jokes, bigoted social media memes, and outdated popular culture references that violate Jesus’s commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Giving up our prejudices sometimes means letting go of what we once thought were artistic treasures. Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew* and *Merchant of Venice*, for example, may be beautifully written, but they normalize domestic violence and antisemitism. It’s long past time that we put them in mothballs.

There are those who would condemn me for pushing a “woke” agenda. I can live with that. Being “woke” is simply waking up to the fact that our prejudices hurt people and we need to stop right now. Jesus’s words to the Canaanite woman were a wake-up call to the disciples and to us. We have slept in ugly bigotry long enough. It’s time to heed Jesus’s call, wake up, and learn from our Lord to recognize each other as the cherished children of our loving God. Amen.