

The Squeaky Wheel

Matthew 15:[10-20] 21-28

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

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

In his dealings with the person identified simply as the Canaanite woman, Jesus seems to be testing her, almost taunting her. She was loud and obstreperous. I expect that her clothes were ragged and that she was more than a little disheveled. “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David,” she yelled, “my daughter is tormented by a demon.”

Matthew, who is writing this account, clearly found the woman annoying because he identifies her as “a Canaanite woman,” which was really an anachronistic term; there was no such place as Canaan or any ethnic identity as Canaanite in first-century Palestine. It would be like identifying someone as a Prussian or referring to an African American as “colored” or an Iraqi as a “Babylonian.” Matthew’s description is actually dismissive, even demeaning to the loud woman demanding Jesus’ attention.

And then the daughter. How embarrassing. The text says that she was “tormented by a demon.” We don’t employ the language of demon possession much these days; we talk instead about mental illness. And I suspect the daughter suffered from what we would now diagnose as some form of schizophrenia or something equally frightening. Matthew and the other disciples wanted the woman, the so-called Canaanite woman, to disappear and leave Jesus alone. They said to Jesus, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.”

All of us have dealt at one time or another with someone who was persistent to the point of annoyance. Our children, for example, or a panhandler on the subway or a student who contests every grade (I call them grade grovelers). We even have an expression that we apply to such people, “The squeaky wheel gets the grease,” and we resent it deeply when they succeed in getting their way. What about me, we ask in silent exasperation? Don’t I deserve the same consideration, even though I didn’t raise such a fuss? Perhaps *because* I didn’t raise such a fuss?

Jesus, as the story is rendered in Matthew, appears, at first glance, to be put off by the insistent woman. He doesn't reply to her initial plea. He even seems to share the xenophobia of his disciples, for he says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," which might be interpreted as a rebuff to a foreigner. Why should he bother, after all? It would be a bit like a politician from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania fielding a request for constituent services from someone in, say, Medford, Oregon, or Norman, Oklahoma. Why bother? What was in it for Jesus? He came to minister to the Jews, not others. Canaanites weren't much of a constituency; in fact, they were no constituency at all.

Surely we can identify with Jesus. He had a lot to do, a lot on his mind. At this stage in his ministry, he was something of a celebrity. He was constantly surrounded by sycophants and beggars. Everyone wanted a piece of him. There were speeches to make and people to heal and phone calls to return. He hadn't checked his e-mail in days.

We know the feeling.

Yet here was this Canaanite woman – loud, imperious, insistent. And she had this schizophrenic daughter who was, by now, causing a ruckus. The disciples tried to avert their eyes, but they kept glancing in her direction.

Perhaps Jesus caught the desperation in the mother's voice, or perhaps he was just testing her resolve. But this episode seems to mark a turning point in Jesus' ministry. Just prior to this encounter with the woman and her schizophrenic daughter, Jesus had yet another of his contretemps with the Pharisees, the Jewish legalists who were dogging his every step, trying to ascertain whether or not he was living up to the letter of the law and observing their rules for ritual purity.

He called them "blind guides" and suggested that "if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." And still the Pharisees and even his disciples didn't get it. True defilement, Jesus explained, did not come from

eating with ritually unclean hands but from an unclean heart. “For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

Immediately thereafter Jesus encounters the so-called Canaanite woman. “Lord, help me,” she pleads. She was crazy; certainly her daughter fit that description, so she was everything the Pharisees reviled. Non-Jewish and therefore, by definition, unclean. And that becomes clear in the ensuing exchange about dogs, which in the rabbinical tradition, was coded language for an unclean person. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” Jesus said. But the woman, undaunted, replies, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

Dakota, our late and lamented Yellow Lab, whose nickname is Ralph, taught me something about dogs over the last decade or so. Ralph was a beggar, not unlike the woman in today’s Gospel. He never had access to the entire house, of course, and certainly not to the dining room. But we knew he was there, waiting on the porch or in the mudroom, hoping for crumbs from the table.

Ralph understood that table scraps were by no means an entitlement, so he was grateful – sometimes pathetically grateful – for whatever he received. And, Lord knows, he could be insistent. Sometimes, if the meal smelled especially good, he whines. Sounded a bit like a squeaky wheel. And Ralph certainly understood the benefits of persistence.

So too with the Canaanite woman. Jesus jousts with her verbally, probably in an effort to determine the seriousness of her intent. Then, satisfied, he declares, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And Matthew informs us that her daughter was healed instantly.

For me, this episode calls to mind the title from one of Flannery O'Connor's best-known stories, the one about the audacity of faith: "The Violent Bear It Away."

Precisely at the time when Jesus, increasingly fed up with the Jewish legalists who dogged him at every turn, was redirecting his ministry from the Jews alone, the Canaanite woman appears and demands his attention. And although Jesus had every right to turn her away – he was tired and she was loud and, besides, his mission was to the house of Israel – he hears her plea and responds to her distress. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

And may it be said of us, great is our faith. That doesn't mean that Jesus responds to our every plea, much less that he grants our every wish. And that's a good thing. As Garth Brooks says, "Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers."

But Jesus rewards persistence. When we call out to the darkness in faith, amid our despair and desperation, we can be assured of a hearing.

The violent bear it away.

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
August 14, 2011
Christ Church
Middle Haddam, Connecticut