

## **THE CONVERSION**

**Scripture Readings:** Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:(10-20) 21-28

**Texts:** Romans 11:32; Matthew 15:27-28

The gospel reading is one of the controversial stories about Jesus because the story shows Jesus in a way we find hard to accept; I mean, can we imagine Jesus calling someone a dog, even if he does in an indirect way? We want to think of Jesus as a kind and gentle person, not someone given to insults and exclusion.

A first century Jewish audience would not have a problem with Jesus in this story even if we do. That first century audience would be more concerned by what Jesus had said in the previous passage where the Pharisees from Jerusalem confront Jesus about not following purity codes. Jesus questions the purity codes by saying it is not what goes into one's mouth that defiles a person, it is what comes out. What comes out of a person's mouth comes from the heart and this is what defiles! While the Jewish audience might take offense at that, we would be cheering: Go Jesus! What is this reversal about?

As the gospel writer tells us, after Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees, he retreats into gentile territory. While there, a woman of the district sees him and starts shouting at him, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." Her shout sounds a lot like the shouting of the two blind men Jesus will meet in Jericho. What makes this shouting so strange is that the gospel writer describes the woman as a Canaanite woman. Just reading the story, we might not think anything of that description, but, in Jesus' time, the term is archaic. It would be like meeting a Norwegian and calling that person a Viking.

We know that the gospel writer uses names and labels with purpose so we might wonder why he uses such an archaic term. The Canaanites were ancient foes of the Hebrews when they entered the Promised Land. In Deuteronomy 7, the Hebrews are urged to show no mercy to the seven nations of Canaan when they enter the land. The way to show no mercy was not to marry them and to eradicate them because otherwise they would distract the people with false gods. When this woman starts shouting to him, Jesus is confronting an ancient foe; and she's a woman, someone he was not even supposed to marry! Although, interestingly, the gospel writer includes two Canaanite women, Tamar and Rahab, in Jesus' genealogy—apparently somebody didn't pay too much attention to the non-marriage clause. Jesus has an ancient enemy shouting at him for mercy which he is not supposed to give!

We can begin to see why Jesus ignores the woman; the disciples, however, cannot and they urge Jesus to send the woman away—have you noticed how often the disciples want Jesus to send people away? Jesus answers the disciples' request in such a way that the woman will overhear—I wonder if he even looks at her—he states that his mission is only directed to the lost sheep of Israel.

Even so the woman persists, she comes over to Jesus and kneels asking for his help. Jesus answers (again, here's one of those places where one wishes that the gospel writer would tell us the tone: sarcastic, irritated, exasperation?) her by asking if it is fair to take the bread from the children and give it to the dogs. Ouch! The woman seems to understand the rules of rabbinic debate when she responds that even the dogs can eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table. In rabbinic debate—that was a grand slam.

Jesus responds—again, I would so like a descriptor, does he smile, does he say it grudgingly, is he astonished?—that her faith is great and let the healing happen, and it does.

Commentators wrestle with the meaning of this scene because Jesus acts like a jerk, at least at first. Some commentators suggest that Jesus was just testing the woman. Yet such a test seems unfair and unnecessarily harsh, she was a desperate parent hoping to find the best solution for her problem and yet Jesus is making her run hoops before he grants a healing? Is it not as though she would be the first gentile that he had healed in the gospel of Matthew, earlier he had healed the slave of a Roman centurion.

Other commentators suggest that Jesus wasn't really trying to intimidate the woman because the Greek word used for dog translates as little dog as in puppy or household pet. The term, though, still dehumanizes her and in Jewish purity codes dogs are considered unclean. If one goes with this interpretation it has certain irony to it where in the previous passage Jesus disparages the purity code, and says that what comes out of the mouth is what defiles one. Jesus, did you listen to what you said?

Maybe we're left with the conclusion that one commentator makes, "Jesus is just being a jerk."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps it is the woman who is the purveyor of the Good News when she turns the metaphor on Jesus and reminds him that all are provided for by God—even the dogs.

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Platt, "Jesus, Bigotry and the Canaanite Woman," *Huffpost*, Jan. 12, 2012, [www.huffingtonpost.com/Christian-piatt/was-jesus-a-bigot\\_b\\_1071655.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/Christian-piatt/was-jesus-a-bigot_b_1071655.html) (Platt is quoting David Lose).

As I have shared with you before the word ‘faith’ in the New Testament might be better understood as ‘trust.’ The woman trusts that Jesus will finally see to what God truly calls him and wholeness/healing would finally come.

Brian D. McLaren has written that the Canaanite descriptor is to take us back in history to the invasion of Canaan by Joshua<sup>2</sup>—Jesus is the Greek translation of the name, Joshua. As we heard, Joshua was to conquer the land and show no mercy to the seven nations of Canaan, but Jesus is reminded in a clever way by the woman that he reveals the God of mercy; she conquers him. The story of Jesus is often a subversion of empire thinking—conquer by being conquered.

His conversion is such that when we go to the next passage, Jesus meets a crowd of gentiles; he heals them and feeds over 4000 of them with several fishes and seven loaves of bread (remember the seven great nations of Canaan). When the feast ends, they gather up seven baskets of crumbs...to feed the dogs? Thus, Jesus finds this new way of conquering; by feeding the other with loaves and fishes.

Jesus remembers that he is called to mercy rather than exclusion; the Kin-dom of God is about bridging and healing brokenness rather than expanding it. Paul confirms this idea when he wrote to the Romans that God is merciful to all.

We seem to have lost this meaning. I am still dismayed by the events in Charlottesville over a week ago. I am saddened that we still have so many people willing to publically display their desire to exclude and dehumanize the ‘other’ and still claim they are Christians. I find it hard to believe that people would think this way.

Yet in research done by Patrick Forscher of the University of Arkansas and Nour Kteily of Northwestern University, they polled 447 Neo-Nazis who felt that other people are less human and less evolved. On a scale of 1 to 100, the group said that white people scored 91.8; Jews scored 73.09; Mexicans scored 67.75; blacks scored 58.77, and Muslims scored 55.4. As far as gender goes, the same people believed that men’s humanness was at 88.47 while women’s was at 83.12 unless the woman was a feminist, then her humanness was at 57.22. One wonders how an assertive Canaanite woman would score.<sup>3</sup>

What such research demonstrates is when a person can dehumanize another then it is easier to dismiss them, exclude them, and even see them as dirty dogs to kill. But as

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Nuechterlein, “Girardian Lectionary, Proper 15A,” August 6, 2017, [girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-a/proper-15a/](http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-a/proper-15a/)

<sup>3</sup> Kali Holloway, “7 Things to Know About the Mindset of the Neo-Nazis,” [Alter.net](http://Alter.net), August 16, 2017, [www.alternet.org/right-wing/7-things-know-about-mindset-neo-nazis](http://www.alternet.org/right-wing/7-things-know-about-mindset-neo-nazis).

Jesus was reminded by an ‘other’, God is the God of all. No one is a dog and all are welcome to God’s mercy.

God has called us to a mission of mercy where we are to conquer people with healing, grace, love, loaves, and fishes. The struggle for many of us is that while we are called to a mission of God’s mercy and love, something most of us willingly do—and I applaud this congregation’s many missions of mercy and your desire to show compassion to refugees. The real struggle, though, is how do we show mercy to those who show no mercy?

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