

Jesus is paying a visit to a coastal region, Canaan, perhaps to be revitalized by the ocean views. Canaan refers to the eastern Mediterranean coast, roughly the modern states of Lebanon and Israel. Two millennia before Jesus, the region of Canaan was a city-state of Phoenicia, a powerhouse of world trade at the time. Its fortunes centered on the seaport of Tyre. There was considerable Egyptian influence in the region as well. Scholars place ancient Israel's ethnicity squarely in the context of Canaanite culture. The land promised Abraham encompassed most of Canaan. Culturally, Israel could hardly be anything other than Canaanite, regardless of the Jews' unique religious claims. Jerusalem had been a city of Canaan centuries before it ever became the city of David. A Phoenician king, Hiram of Tyre, assisted in the construction of the First Temple. In Jesus' day, the region of Canaan carried positive associations – prosperity, culture, strong government. Matthew describes the location as an area near Tyre and Sidon. It is several days up-country from Galilee. What Jesus encounters in the bustling cities of Tyre and Sidon is a world apart from his home-base in Galilee. Canaanite cities are urban and multicultural. Families of even the merchant class are prosperous enough to keep homes both in town and in the country. By comparison with the locals, Jesus and his entourage are peasants. Our lesson is about a transformation that occurs in Canaan of three people: a local mother, her daughter, and a healer.

Mother is transformed into a person with her own voice, her own authority. Daughter is transformed into a full participant in her community, no longer demon-possessed. Healer is transformed into an evangelist to the world. Let's examine the motives of these three people.

The Mother

We are told that the mother is Canaanite, suggesting that she is well-off, worldly, and most important, non-Jewish. There's the additional factor that she is female. She confronts the visiting disciples first, then confronts Jesus, all of whom at first ignore her. We need to set aside our modern partiality to strong advocates, male or female. In the patriarchal world of the ancient near east, only males made public gestures like this. Women and children had no standing apart from their male parent or spouse. This woman is lacking a male advocate. But the Canaanite mother doesn't sit around waiting for men to act. If no one else will present her daughter's case, she can. If no one in Phoenicia can heal her daughter, this famous healer Jesus can. She appeals to his core value, which is mercy. "Have mercy on me, O Master, Son of David. My daughter is wickedly demonized." In this encounter she is presumptuous, yet knowledgeable of her patron's religious authority. Desperate for her daughter's well-being, the mother wills herself to break the rules keeping her apart from the visitors from Galilee. She may be breaking some family rules, as well. Her own family almost certainly would disapprove of her waylaying a male stranger in a public street.

The Daughter

We don't know why the child's father
(or uncle or older brother) is not making this appeal.
Perhaps her affliction casts a cloud
over the entire family, keeping them secluded.
(As we know, an entire household is under suspicion
when one member has a demon.)
It is possible that they have spent
considerable money on doctors for the child,
to no avail.

The family has probably taken a room
near the only road from Galilee,
so they can get a good glimpse
of the visiting healer,
this foreigner with a great reputation.

The Healer and His Company

Wandering away from home territory
is a big deal for Jesus.
Jesus is crossing a boundary into Gentile territory,
always a chancy undertaking in Biblical narratives.
He leaves a world of order and honor
where he and everyone else know their place.
He enters a world of uncertainty, even chaos.
Jesus seems preoccupied,
as if on a mission that cannot be interrupted.
Our Gospel lesson portrays a meaner,
rougher Jesus than most gospel accounts.
On the other hand, the disciples' brusque attitude
would have appeared quite normal
to Matthew's audience.
As visitors in foreign territory, they are "one down."
That is why they are so defensive.

The Interaction

They are in no mood to be accosted by a stranger.
Still, it is surprising that from Jesus' lips
comes an epithet Jews reserved for Gentiles: dog.
Jesus says to the woman,
"it is not good to take bread from young children
and toss it to pet dogs."

(The remark is startling to us, as it undoubtedly was
to the first listeners to the gospel.

All the more reason to suppose it is historical;
else it wouldn't have made it
into both Matthew and Mark.)

In the interaction that follows,
the woman is more than up to his challenge.
She flings the epithet back to Jesus,
catching him up short.

"Even pet dogs eat the little bits
falling from the table of their masters."

Quite a rejoinder.

She makes her case with grace, wit, and grit,
according to cultural scholar Kenneth Bailey.
Without angering Jesus or frustrating him,
she persists long enough for her wish to be granted.
It's now up to Jesus to grant or deny her mercy.

I imagine that a long, thoughtful silence follows.
In that pause, Jesus ponders
the import of his mission.

Jesus experiences something like repentance –
a submission to his Father's greater purpose.
He can no longer limit his ministry
to the lost sheep of Israel.

This side-trip to Gentile territory opens his eyes
to all the earthly children of God the father.

The good news of God's gospel takes mature form
during the pause before he responds:

"Oh woman, your faith speaks loud.
"May it be done for you as you request."

He speaks to her in the divine passive,
"may it be done for you."

The very grammar suggests Jesus' deference
to a higher power.

He accepts the mother's parable of God's mercy:
crumbs falling from an abundant table.

God's table has enough mercy for all.

And the Gospel Begins.

We tend to think of “healing” in a medical sense – cessation of the symptoms of illness.

But I think Jesus also sees healing in a social sense – the end of isolation, the restoring of relationships within society and relationships with God.

It’s in that sense that I claim the Gospel begins with this episode.

The lesson ends with Jesus returning to the area around Lake Galilee, and climbing high upon a hill.

From this vantage point, Jesus can see the wider implications of his ministry –

that the gospel, the good news heralded by angels at Jesus’ birth, is for all the world.

And the Gospel Begins its trajectory, arcing right up to the present day.

We Gentiles might not be hearing the Gospel were it not for the impact of this outspoken outsider.

The brazen appearance of organized neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and armed civilian militia shocked a quiet college town on August 11 and 12, and a whole nation.

The violence demonstrates that the deep discontent of white males feeling disenfranchised is exploiting the current political climate to go public.

White racism has always been bubbling beneath the surface, but these days the lid is lifted and the bile spills into the streets.

Belief in the supremacy of one group over another is sinful.

The story of Jesus in Canaan reminds us that fear of other-ness is counter to the gospel.

Embracing that which is the gospel is always a risk.

As this text illustrates, it means accepting differences. ■

Our culture is no less exclusive of “outsiders” than the ancient near East.

We are just as quick to apply dismissive labels to people who we perceive as Other:

Politician. Single parent. Muslim. Lesbian.

Joseph’s brothers label him an Egyptian ruler.

The label blinds them to the reality of who their half-brother has become.

The label prevents them from accepting him to the extent that Joseph is accepting them.

Joseph’s claim to be their kin leaves them stunned.

Labels rarely capture the total reality.

The use of labels simplifies a complicated, messy, ever-changing world.

Labeling justifies our fears without benefit of the thought-process,

as the Car Talk guys used to say.

We prefer to live with the demons we know, rather than risk uncovering

the demons lurking below.

Labels and stereotypes prevent us from actualizing Jesus’ radical openness toward different people.

Rather than be labeled “different” by our peers, we acquiesce to labeling others.

It keeps “us” and “them”

in safe, separate compartments.

Repenting of our stereotypes is Gospel work.

Few of us are as strong as Jesus.

Jesus can help us repent,

because he has done it himself.

Admitting we are powerless to reform our lives is the first step toward repentance.

If we take this lesson to heart as a church,

we are to abandon the idea that God’s grace is for Christians only.

The good news is for all the world.

Praise God! We are never “over the border” of God’s dominion.

Like crumbs falling from a broken loaf,

God’s mercy rains down on the just and unjust alike.

We don’t have to be one of God’s special people to be fed from God’s table of grace.

We don't have to be in the right place,
 or the right time, or the right frame of mind,
 to pray.
 We don't even have to make a case for ourselves –
 God knows what we need.
 We can pray the peace of God
 for persons in Sierra Leone and Barcelona.
 And they can pray for us.
 No one is beyond the boundary of gospel love.
 Not James Alex Fields, the driver charged
 with 2nd degree murder in Charlottesville.
 Not Moussa Oukabir, 18-year-old Moroccan
 suspected of the terror attack in Barcelona.
 Not Dylann Roof, self-confessed and convicted
 murderer of nine in Charleston, South Carolina.
 It's up to God, not up to us, to grant mercy.
 Every prayer counts.

CONCLUSION

This text challenges us to seek repentance.
 Repentance is personal transformation.
 When we really, really want to be free of our demons,
 we are ready for repentance.
 Repentance is scary.
 It's crossing a boundary
 between the familiar and the new.
 It's a journey into uncertainty.
 Our Master leads the way through the transition.
 Knowing that we do nothing to deserve his mercy,
 we can confidently trust that Jesus accompanies us
 on the journey of repentance.
 We must be willing to accept that his response,
 like the Canaanite woman's response to Jesus,
 may not be what we expect.
 It may catch us off-guard.
 Submitting to God's larger plan
 is part of the mystery of faith.
 Christ has died, Christ is risen,
 Christ will come again.
 We can trudge along to the land of Canaan –
 the messy world of politics, money, and class –
 with heads down, defenses up, labels at the ready.
 Or we can respond freely and graciously
 to God's abundant table of grace.
 The gospel begins with repentance.
 Let it begin with me. And with you.
 Amen.