

9th Sunday after Pentecost Year A
August 14, 2011
St. Luke Sheboygan Falls
Matthew 15:10-28

Talking back to Jesus

Let us pray. Lord, even as you opened up your heart to the Canaanite woman, help us to open up to those who are different than us. AMEN.

All my life I've been taught to believe that Jesus loves everybody, especially outsiders and outcasts. After all he ate with sinners of all types, even dishonest tax collectors and prostitutes.

Today's gospel is one of the hardest one's to preach because we see a whole other side of Jesus. The Canaanite woman in the story approaches Jesus with his guard down. As he enters Tyre and Sidon he is totally focused on his mission, which he says is to gather the lost sheep of Israel. The woman who calls to him on behalf of her demon-tormented daughter is a "triple-

outsider" on account of her gender, her ethnicity as a Canaanite who were hated by Jews throughout all of their history and her religious affiliations as an idol-worshipper. Jesus' disciples urge him to send this distasteful person away.

At this point, one might say, well, we know that the disciples are dummies, but Jesus will set things right. Then, we hear Jesus' surprising answer that his ministry is limited.

Then the woman kneels before him and begs. Surely, Jesus will help her then, right? Wrong. His reply is horrifying. A brutal slap in the face. There is no way to soften the blow. ***"It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."***

Referring to Canaanites as dogs was a familiar insult of the Israelites. Calling a woman a female dog had the same force then as it would yelled in a high school

hallway today. It is almost impossible to explain away or excuse Jesus' words. They are simply not nice.

To her credit, the woman doesn't trade insult for insult. She doesn't back down because her daughter's need is great. She maintains her poise as she responds, ***"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."***

At that moment, seeing the Canaanite woman's faith, JESUS CHANGES HIS MIND. We are often led to believe that God is unchanging. Yet, we see in this story, that this woman's words, her prayers, make a difference. In this story, we see a glimpse of Jesus' human side, a side we may not like so much. Matthew's gospel reveals Jesus as a man, who was conditioned by his environment. Yet, Jesus was at the same time, God, able to see the woman's great faith and heal her daughter!

I find it fascinating that in a culture much more sexist than our own, Jesus was willing to not only hear a woman's pleas, but allow her to teach him something. Ironically, whether she knew it or not, she was only urging Jesus to put into practice the words he had only just taught the crowds, that it isn't what goes into a person that makes him unclean, but what comes out of a person.

There are few things more insulting to a woman than to call her a female dog. The woman in today's gospel stood up to Jesus so that his eyes were opened and He could see her as a person worthy of his attention and love. So He could reveal Himself to her and to us as the Jesus we know and worship.

This is such a hard reading for me. I don't like to see the Lord depicted this way. Yet, this is the kind of story that the gospel

writers would have brushed under the carpet if there weren't some truth to it.

Some commentators try to "let Jesus off" by saying that he was "testing" the woman's faith, but that in itself seems cruel. Either way, it's a chink in Jesus' human armor, a place where he needed to grow in his understanding as all of us do. I have to wrestle with the question, "Is it more important to me that Jesus be perfect, sinless or that he be real and human?" "What does it mean for Jesus to be fully God and fully man?"

It seems to me that a text like this leaves room for us to be like the Canaanite woman and talk back to God, to wonder aloud about the injustices we see in the world and somehow expect an answer. It may not come as quickly as it did for the woman, it may even call for some action on our part that we need to ask God for the

courage to stand up to the powers of oppression and evil in the world like Martin Luther, Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders like Rosa Parks who dared to hold onto her seat on the bus.

It means that our prayers don't always need to be perfectly structured and that sometimes it will feel like we are begging for crumbs from the Master. The Canaanite woman was desperate and hungry for hope. Just when she began to feel like a dog, Jesus saw her faith and her daughter was instantly healed. That is our hope too—when we feel at our lowest Jesus will meet us where we are and give us what we need. We don't have to settle for the crumbs, for the Lord now invites us to sit at the Master's table. His death and resurrection opens the door so that all are now welcome. AMEN.