Jesus Changes His Mind
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Did Jesus just call that woman a dog?

Yes, yes he did – or, if you read some of the commentaries on this text they'll try to tell you that it wasn't "dog" per se, but more like "puppy" it's more endearing…

I'm not sure there's a way to slice this that is very endearing – puppy, dog, or other names, this interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman is uncomfortable

It's uncomfortable to read and hear, all the more uncomfortable to imagine happening in real life and almost unfathomable that it happened

Jesus wouldn't do that, right?

Jesus wouldn't insult someone and call them a dog, would he?

No, not our Jesus – not our Jesus who we have been taught to believe was PERFECT

Perfect in every way – perfect love, perfect compassion, perfect patience, perfect mercy…he probably had perfect hair, too

It's this picture of perfection – or, maybe not perfection, but it is this picture that Jesus represents and embodies some ultimate holiness that is always something we are to be striving to be like, it's this strain of our belief that is most uncomfortable with this interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman

It's *so* uncomfortable that this embodiment of perfection that we're learning might not be so perfect that scholars try to reason our way into making it

more comfortable – hence the insight that it wasn't "dog" that he said, but rather "my little puppy"

Not to poo-poo this too much, this hermeneutical approach can be quite insightful sometimes – rather than taking something in the Bible at face value, we investigate the words and the context and the circumstances and often when we do that we find a nuance that does remind us that things aren't as black and white as they appear to be in the text

A lot of great insights in the church have come to us with this line of hermeneutics – which is the fancy church word for "study" or "method of study"

But, you know, another important hermeneutical tool – or method of meaning-making when reading the Bible – probably has some fancy term that I'm forgetting, but I'm just going to call it "sitting in the ick"

Sometimes we need to sit in the ick of a story, to sit in the discomfort of a narrative, in order to get a sense of the meaning in one of these more challenging stories

And, I think this text this morning from Matthew is one of those stories where we have to sit in the ick for a little bit

Jesus said "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

While he didn't directly call the woman a dog, his comment infers as much

Jesus called her a dog

It was mean – it was unkind

It was a cheap shot that played into stereotypes and cultural norms of the time

Remember Canaanites were the people in the Holy Land that were displaced by the Israelites returning from Egypt

There are lots of laws in the Hebrew Bible about not inter-marrying with them, not falling for their God (Baal), not straying from the pure core beliefs and cultural practices of the Israelites and their God

Dr. Eunyung Lim of Middlebury College notes in her commentary: “Several layers of tension thus arise from the ethnic, religious, and gender differences between Jesus (and his disciples) and the Canaanite woman” [1]

Jesus’ snap about taking food from the children and throwing it to the dogs – and it does feel like a snap rather than a really thoughtful response to this woman’s request – is generated from the worst parts of his community’s relationship to other people rather than their best

When we lean into stereotypes and cultural norms rather than really thinking through our feelings and responses we can really say mean and unthoughtful things, can’t we

And can you imagine the composure of this woman who, at the reputation of a man who has healed so many, comes in desperate need of healing for her child (her own child!) – and when she makes her request, as so many have done before her, she is instead chided and insulted

Imagine the composure it took to respond as she does: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

To be honest, in this story this woman isn’t looking for a seat at the table with the disciples and this great healer, but a morsel of grace would go a long way

[1] https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vyHNjHFF1nuid9XsTaQ_JBDSvZOkV255WNZ-_8OwBxk/edit?tab=t.0

Dr. Lim writes, “I often introduce this to my students as the ‘When Jesus goes low, the woman goes high’ moment. Verse 27 is the narrative climax, where the Canaanite woman actively and patiently dismantles the ethnic, religious, and gender barriers the narrative set up earlier.”

With one phrase we see the injustice, with one phrase the ridiculousness is revealed, with one phrase she has called the question on Jesus himself “are not all worthy?”

Jesus feels convicted by her comment – he was wrong!

Jesus is compelled by her comment – “Woman, great is your faith!”

Jesus is overwhelmed with compassion at her comment – “‘Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.”

To be clear – Jesus changed his mind.

The Canaanite woman’s comment helped him see the error of his judgement, and he changed his mind

What does this mean for us and our “perfect” Jesus?

Our “perfect” Jesus showed us that he truly was fully human – influenced by the stories his community told themselves about “other” people, he showed us his true humanity in this story

And, Jesus showed us that he was truly fully divine – he changed his mind

Wait a second, what do I mean by him changing his mind being the example of being fully divine?

Remember, God’s “mind” has been changed before, too

A great example is on Mt. Sinai when Moses is pleading with God not to destroy the migrant Israelites who, in their exhaustion in the wilderness, have made a golden calf and have raged against God

God had made the decision to wipe them out, and it is Moses who pleads on their behalf

“Moses implored the Lord his God and said, ‘O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?...Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people’... And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.” (Exodus 32)

God’s “mind” has been changed before and Jesus’ mind was also changed in this interaction

Wonderfully, in Matthew’s story, Jesus’ mind was not changed by some pillar of the faith like God’s was with Moses on Mt. Sinai (can’t beat that line up!)

Rather, Jesus’ mind was changed by a total outsider – an ethnic, religious, and gender outsider changes Jesus’ mind

Now, we know it’s easy to change our minds, isn’t it?

Easy to change our minds when we are ensconced in our cultural norms and comforts.

Easy to say “gosh you’re right, I’m wrong.”

Easy to let go of stereotypes and surface-level understandings of other people and cultures

Easy to recognize the ways we benefit from the advantages of our society while others do not have the same access

Easy, right? …NOT EASY

And, thanks to this story about Jesus in Matthew's gospel, we know it hasn't been easy for a long time

And, turns out, it wasn't easy for Jesus either

Hear that again – it wasn't easy for Jesus either

The easy part was the insult – the stereotype, the cultural norm, the making a comment that fits the narrative in an easy way

The hard part, was hearing from a person you assume you have nothing in common with and who you've just insulted that, in fact, you share so much more than you don't

hearing from her that the stereotypes and cultural norms and narratives have eroded something we know to be true since the beginning of time which is that God created all of us and declared all of us good

hearing from her a sermon he preached from his own lips which is that all are worthy of God's love and blessed are those who society puts down

No changing our minds isn't easy, and no Jesus wasn't perfect

But he was faithful – and so was the Canaanite woman – FAITHFUL

They both leaned into the truths that they knew and had learned about our God and vulnerably believed that change was possible

And it was, and it is – even for us today who find it so hard to change, or open, our minds

Let us, too, be faithful and as the saying goes: don’t let perfection be the enemy of the good.

Amen.