

## Jesus and the Foreign Woman<sup>1</sup>

We worry about this little episode because Jesus does not appear as compassionate as we think he should be toward this desperate woman who is concerned about her daughter. Jesus even seems a tad racist here. He uses the expression "dog" to refer to non-Jewish people or Gentiles. Dogs had low status in the ancient Middle East and to call someone or a group dogs, frankly was an insult. So what do we do with all of this? How can this be God's word for us today?

I'd like to respond to concern about this incident in three ways and then suggest how our lives can be richer because of what we learn from the Canaanite woman.

My first response is to observe that the very difficulty and apparent offensiveness of this episode virtually guarantees that it really happened just this way. This isn't the kind of thing that someone would make up because it just sounded like something Jesus

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on August 9, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

would do. Here's how this works. Before Bibles were produced on printing presses they were laborious hand-copied letter by letter. With every copy comes the temptation to fix the mistakes. "Oh," thinks some monk, who spends 10 hours a day copying the Bible, this couldn't be the Jesus I know," treating this poor mother this way. I'll just switch one little word. Jesus couldn't have said "dog," here. He said ah...'little lamb.'"

Of course, it's clear that such tinkering hasn't happened. And that's the good part. This difficult text has survived all these years. It just couldn't be made up because it just isn't the kind of warm fuzzy that someone would want to get into the Bible. So, we're really looking at an un-retouched Jesus in action.

The second reassuring thing I'd like to share is that even the appearance of Jesus being unkind to an outsider—a Canaanite and a mom—is inconsistent with the Bible's overall honoring of outsiders. In other words,

this text leads us to ask, "Is this the Bible's true attitude toward outsiders and toward women?" Did Jesus really think that everyone who was not Jewish or who was not a follower of him was a lesser person? The answer is no. I think of Ruth, the woman from Moab, who became King David's grandmother, or Jonah who preached to the hated Ninevites or the many instances in Jesus' ministry—like the Parable of the Good Samaritan—where the outsider proves to be more faithful and upright than the in-group be it Israel or the discipleship circle. The dominant Biblical message is that believers have much to learn from those supposed to be outsiders. And the dominant biblical message about women is that Jesus inaugurates a whole new direction in his attitude towards women. In every other place in the New Testament Jesus treats women with respect and compassion. That truth comes out when we consider this passage.

Thirdly, to the heart of the matter. I'm convinced that Jesus' negativity towards the Canaanite woman is

merely a setup for her faith to shine through and for the disciples to learn a powerful lesson.

Here's how I reach that conclusion.

The story begins with Jesus simply ignoring the woman. He doesn't speak to her. This is standard behavior in those times. For Jewish teachers to have no interaction with women or foreigners was the prevailing practice. The disciples, feeling pestered by the woman, beg Jesus to "get rid of her." Jesus complies, superficially, by saying, (I'll paraphrase) "That's right boys; we have nothing to do with people like this woman, do we. We're all elect people. We're from elect people. God has smiled on us in a special way, hasn't he? So we don't mess with the likes of her."

It is as if Jesus is stating and exaggerating the social norm and attitude in order to bring it out into the open and put it on display.

With this, Jesus offers a challenge to the woman: "Is it not fair to take the children's bread and throw

it to the dogs?" Interestingly enough, this isn't the first time that Jesus has asked a hard question of someone who has come seeking a miracle. The challenge, the tough question isn't a barrier but an opportunity for the person to show her stuff.

It's as if Jesus is saying to the woman: "We're supposed to be the elect people. Even as a Canaanite you know what our attitude is. We tend to think that God is only interested in us not inferior folks like you. I'm not supposed to have a ministry to you. Isn't that the way we should be thinking? What do you say?"

Now, this is another one of those miraculous moments where Jesus has created a perfect setup for the woman to say something as brilliant and passionate as here response. "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table."

Everywhere else in Jesus' ministry it is Jesus who is the master at the clever come-back. Think of his wonderful remarks—"Render to Caesar what belongs to

Caesar and to God what belongs to God." Or, last week's life saving: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone at her." This is the only instance I can think of where the person for whom the miracle is performed shows mastery at one wag called "tongue-fu." The fast remark.

In an instant, she has shown herself as understanding more about Jesus and more about faith than we or the disciples might ever dream. Hasn't she figured out the great power of the plea, "Lord, help me?" All of us as disciples can learn from her. Some time when you or I are in real trouble that prayer will be there for us. Maybe like her there are half a dozen reasons that God shouldn't hear that prayer. Maybe we don't deserve to have that prayer answered. Maybe we are not one of the chosen ones—whatever that means. Maybe there are untold barriers that would prevent God from paying attention to our prayer. That's how it was for a Canaanite woman long ago. She persisted. Her plea was simple and trusting: "Lord, help me!" And it

worked. Jesus marveled at her persistence and he answered that prayer. That prayer still works. It's there for you and me. And we have the Canaanite woman to thank for reminding us of that simple and powerful truth.