

### Spin Zone

I don't like this Jesus. I would like to find a way to spin this passage, make him more palatable, make it easier to understand, or even ignore it altogether, and I am not alone. Over the past week I have read many commentators, both scholars and other pastors, who want to explain away the harsh depiction of Jesus that we meet here. Some want to say that Jesus changes his mind, that the Canaanite woman shows him a new way. They cite examples from the Hebrew Scriptures when God changes God's mind, such as the flood. This works well with the belief that Jesus is fully human, that he doesn't know everything, while bumping up against our belief that Jesus is fully divine. Still others insist that Jesus says these things and uses this moment as a teaching moment for the disciples. They believe that Jesus always intends to answer the woman's plea, and that he uses a kind of role-play exercise to make a point. That's an ok explanation, but there is nothing in the text itself to back that point up. Both options leave most of us feeling uncomfortable, or at least unsatisfied. Still others almost jump right over Jesus' difficult words and head straight to the inclusion of the woman in the mercy and grace of God. That option sounds appealing, but it still leaves an inconvenient gap. This Jesus does not fit with my preferred image of Jesus. Jesus is supposed to be the one who speaks a kind word when world is hurling insults. Jesus is supposed to be the one who hears the cries of the hurting when everyone else tunes them out.

In the verses that come just before our text, Jesus has offended the Pharisees again by proclaiming to the crowd that, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."<sup>1</sup> Once again, Jesus is trying to shape or re-shape the community by calling them back to the spirit behind the law. The writer of Matthew's gospel is concerned to make it clear that Jesus is in fact the hoped-for Jewish Messiah. For Jesus to be accepted as such, it is crucial that he not be understood as dismissing the law and the salvation history that are crucial to the covenant life Israel has with God. Israel's

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 15: 11

adherence to the law is not simply about following obscure regulations but about being a distinctively faithful community amid a very diverse world. Jesus, especially Matthew's Jesus does not want to change that.

Jesus moves on from arguing with the Pharisees—those who understand themselves as stewards and protectors of Israel's heritage and faith traditions—and goes to the “district of Tyre and Sidon.”<sup>2</sup> This territory is Gentile territory, meaning that it is an area that is not only *not* Jewish, its inhabitants are hostile to Judaism and are longstanding enemies of Israel. Even by coming close to the border of this region, Jesus and the disciples are inviting, if not instigating a clash of traditions. Almost on cue, a Canaanite woman approaches Jesus, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”<sup>3</sup> This one statement tells quite a bit. First, she is Canaanite, a member of the tribe of Canaan, one historic enemy of Israel. She shouts at Jesus; this is no soft-spoken, whispered plea. And she will not be passed by or overlooked. And then there are the titles she chooses to address Jesus: Lord and Son of David. As one scholar points out:

In Matthew, ‘Lord’ is addressed to Jesus only by true believers, and ‘Son of David’ is used by the marginalized of society, the no-accounts who recognize the Messiah of Israel, whom the leaders of Israel reject.<sup>4</sup>

If we are part of Matthew's original audience our ears perk up. Even though she's from the enemy camp, she seems to grasp who Jesus is. Surely Jesus will answer her cry for help...but he does not acknowledge her at all. The disciples get in on the act, not out of compassion but out of annoyance and frustration: “Please, just make her go away.” The woman and her screeching do not fit into the disciples' plans for the day. She is an outsider after all, about as outside as a person can get by their standards: she's a Canaanite and she has a demon-possessed child. She has two strikes against her before she even opens her mouth, and then she starts screeching. In the disciples' estimation she is desperate and inconvenient, if not downright unworthy. Strike three.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 15: 21, NRSVue

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 15: 22, NRSVue

<sup>4</sup> John P.Meir, “Matthew 15: 21-28,” *Interpretation*, 1986, p. 398.

When Jesus does answer, he does not answer in the way we expect: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus points to his distinctive identity within a distinctive community. The woman does not argue with this distinction. In fact, she recognizes his identity more perceptively than some of his own insiders. After all she has addressed him as “Son of David,” the title given to the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. And still she is not deterred, she persists; she kneels before Jesus and says, “Lord, help me.”<sup>6</sup> She recognizes the breadth and depth of God’s power and compassion in this One. This Jesus may not be One that she knowingly longed for, but she will not allow the walls between them stand in the way of her hope. She will not let this moment pass her by. Jesus then responds with one of the most uncomfortable passages we encounter in the gospel: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”<sup>7</sup>

My family could easily be described as “dog people.” In fact, that’s an understatement. Growing up, our dogs were beloved members of the family. When one of our dogs had a litter of puppies, my mother saved the runt and named him Henry. My dad used to joke that if he believed in re-incarnation, he would hope to come back as a dog owned by my mother because she never treated him that well or looked at him the way she looked at Henry. There is no spinning Jesus’ words here, however. Though Jesus uses a word that means “little dogs,” dogs are not depicted positively in scripture. This is not a term of affection; it is an insult. There are very real divisions between Israel and Canaan. When Jesus says that it is not fair, the meaning of the word is that it is not morally right. And the woman does not argue with this point. She is willing to accept even the crumbs, the scraps, because somehow, somehow she knows that there is more than enough to go around. Just as we saw in the story of the loaves and fishes, the crumbs are more than enough to feed and nourish the multitudes. This woman seems to see that while Jesus is without question the **Jewish** Messiah, the lunge, reach, and grasp of God extend far beyond the bounds of one community.

This distinctive role does not ultimately mean that Jesus comes exclusively to Israel. Later in Matthew’s gospel, the disciples themselves will be sent to baptize all nations. You and I can give thanks for that

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 15: 24

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 15: 25

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 15: 25

commission, because while we in the church often see ourselves as the disciples, not many of us can trace our genetic family tree to ancient Israel. So we could see ourselves in a variety of places in this story. Maybe we do see ourselves in the disciples. Maybe we get impatient when our mission—as we understand it—gets interrupted by inconvenient or unsavory demands and needs. There is only so much time, energy, and money to go around after all. We may feel we have our hands full helping those whom we know. We too may feel exasperated by pleas, shouts, and screeches coming from those who seem undeserving, those who really have no one to blame but themselves for the mess they are in. We may even help them, but it may be more out of impatience than compassion.

Or maybe we see ourselves in the woman. After all we have no special claim on God's mercy, but we come here anyway because somehow, someway we believe that God is big enough to care even for us, that this Messiah can help us too. While we admire the woman's wit and perseverance, her most striking attribute may be her lack of presumptuousness. She in no way believes that she is entitled to the grace and mercy God in Jesus offers. She knows she is an outsider; she knows that she is unworthy; and yet, she persists in hope, and Jesus proclaims that her faith is great. The Canaanite woman sees exactly who Jesus is and who she is. Her cry for help comes not because she believes she is worthy to be helped, but because she sees that Jesus alone *can* help. It's not about her; it's about him.

So instead of our spinning this text, perhaps we should allow it to spin us, to turn us around, to change our perspective. Instead of doing backbends to change the text into something more palatable, more acceptable, maybe we should allow the text to bend us, to shape us and change us. This screeching, desperate woman reminds us that great faith is not about the claim we have on God, but about God's claim on us, not because we are good or deserving but because God insists on claiming us, no matter how demanding, desperate, or inconvenient we may be.

Our current cultural moment is saturated in spin at the moment. We are inundated by an infinite number of voices who do their very best to out-spin and out-shout their opponent on any number of subjects. All this spin makes us dizzy, blurring our vision and throwing us off balance. Spin is very often about control—

trying to control the message, trying to control the image, trying to control the outcome. There is an old Shaker song entitled “Simple Gifts.” The first verse is pretty familiar, “‘Tis a gift to be simple, ‘tis a gift to be free,” but the refrain which may be a bit unfamiliar, fits exactly with this notion of being spun around:

When true simplicity is gained  
To bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed  
To turn, turn will be our delight  
‘Till by turning, turning we come round right.<sup>8</sup>

I find it fascinating that the Spirit led the writer of Mathew (and Mark) to include this passage when telling the story of Jesus, that the tradition insisted this episode be included. The writers could have spun Jesus’ story; they could have edited this encounter out and tidied Jesus up a bit. But they didn’t. They kept this moment where Jesus is not perfectly polite, where he even fumbles a bit, reminding us that the story of redemption is not a perfectly performed magic trick. The gospel writers kept this encounter with a loud, stubborn, persistent, desperate mother, one who like the Psalmist does not hesitate to screech out to the One who has the power to do something when she does not. She is not interested in politeness or pretty words or explanations or excuses. She knows Jesus can make her daughter—and her—whole. She does not have time for spin; her world is spinning out of control. I confess that this woman makes me downright uncomfortable, and yet, I am inspired by her honest voice and her faithfully stubborn insistence that Jesus can in fact make things right. She has a lot to teach me.

What if I stop trying to spin the gospel? What if I stop trying to pretty up my prayers and my pleas? Then, by the grace of God, like this woman I just might find a way to trust Jesus to be who he says he is, to be honest about how badly I need him to save me, to save us, to save this whole beloved battered mess we find ourselves in. Matthew didn’t see any need to spin this Jesus or erase this inconvenient woman; maybe the church would do well to follow his lead. If we stop trying so hard to tame Jesus or pretty him up, maybe we too will begin to hear other forgotten, left behind, messy, loud, inconvenient ones who are crying out for Jesus

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<sup>8</sup> <https://songofamerica.net/song/simple-gifts/>

and for the church—Christ's body—to do something. There is no way to spin our own way to salvation or make ourselves whole. We all need Jesus—whether we are perfectly polished or obnoxiously needy or somewhere in between. We all need Jesus to turn us around and make us whole. And in the end that is exactly what he promises to do.

Thanks be to God. Amen.