

“Jesus v. the Law”

The story of the foreign woman’s conversation with Jesus in front of his disciples during the second part of today’s Scripture may seem extremely jarring and bizarre, at first! How are we to make sense of it? Some preachers and others say it revealed Jesus’ humanity and provides us Jesus’ example – how one learns to overcome personal prejudices. Others, who see his words as completely contradictory to his status as the Son of God, conclude Matthew’s and Mark’s sources for the story must have been messed up royally! I believe the reason we have a problem understanding the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, is **we are not fully aware of the context and Matthew’s description does not explicitly give us insight into the dynamics of how Jesus used that event to communicate his unhappiness with his disciples’ affinity for the prejudices and self-serving legalism of the Pharisees.**

Billy Strayhorn starts to discuss the disciples’ misguided views by sharing the story of how “A family of five was enjoying their day at the beach. The children were playing in the ocean and making sand castles when in the distance a little old lady appeared. Her gray hair was blowing in the wind and her clothes were dirty and ragged. She was muttering something to herself as she picked up things from the beach and put them into a bag. The parents called the children to their side and told them to stay away from the old lady. As she passed by, bending down every now and then to pick something up, she smiled at the family. But her greeting wasn’t returned.”

Strayhorn continues the story, “Couple weeks later this family learned that little old lady was a retired school teacher who’d made it her lifelong crusade to pick up bits of glass from the beach so children wouldn’t cut their feet. And as she picked up the broken glass, she prayed for the people who had dropped it, even though she didn’t know who they were.”

Strayhorn starts laying out his conclusions, saying, “Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, gave his life on the cross so that we might know the love, forgiveness and acceptance of our God. Jesus died for each of us personally.” **“We can’t look at another human being without thinking to ourselves, Jesus died for them, too.”** Strayhorn concludes, “We do a disservice when we jump to conclusions about people because of how they look, where they live or the type of work that they do.” Strayhorn declares, **“We are all equal in Jesus’ eyes.”** (Billy D. Strayhorn, From the Pulpit, CSS Publishing Company)

The topic of judging individuals or groups of people based on assumptions, instead of evidence, is always troubling. **Unfortunately, different segments of a society – in the past, present or future, make generalizations or assumptions about folks from other ethnic or racial or religious backgrounds, which are judgmental and prejudicial.** We have seen an increase in such situations in the news during the past several years – ranging from religious minority groups being threatened with genocide in Iraq by a terrorist army to an unarmed African American teenager being killed by a white police officer, who is reported to have shot him numerous times from a significant distance.

Just prior to today’s Scripture Reading – in 15:1-9, Jesus and the Pharisees had a confrontation in front of a crowd of bystanders over the legalists’ assumptions about judging someone different from themselves. In the first verse of today’s Scripture, Jesus continued his challenge against the Pharisee’s system of Law and summed up for the crowd, **“Listen and understand! It is not what goes into your mouth that makes you ritually unclean; rather, what comes out of it makes you unclean.”** The Pharisees and their legalist allies had coming out of their mouths hands in a certain way before eating, to eat only specific foods, to prepare foods exactly according to their rules, and many more laws.

After Jesus publically exposed the falseness of the Pharisees’ arguments and demands, Matthew reports, **“Then the disciples came to him and said, ‘Do you know that the Pharisees had their feelings hurt by what you said?’”** Jesus was not moved to sympathize with the Pharisees by his disciples’ challenging question. Instead, their Teacher and our Savior said, **“Every plant which my Father in heaven did not plant will be pulled up. Don’t worry about them! They are blind leaders of the blind; and when one blind man leads another, both fall into a ditch.”**

Interestingly, the eldest of the disciples demonstrated his failure or should I say “refusal” to follow Jesus’ teaching or declaration on this subject, he also fell into the ditch, and **“Peter spoke up, ‘Explain this saying to us.’”** Jesus’ immediate response was a withering critique of the disciples’ failure to comprehend his teachings, actions, and commands! However, I also suggest, **Jesus’ interaction with the foreign mother and his disciples was, perhaps, an even more powerful and transforming answer to his disciples!**

James Boyce suggests a similar insight, stating, “So stretch your imaginations to entertain the scene. Gathered in one corner are those familiar disciples, for Matthew the true blue representatives of the faithful lost sheep of Israel, now leaping into the fray like so many ravenous beasts, as it were self-styled guarantors of the holy tradition, on their guard

lest the mercies of God be wasted on the unworthy. Like a gang of watchdogs at the door they are about the checking of IDs and keeping out the non-pedigreed riffraff. On the other side of the gate stands this outsider, a woman no less, one lone representative of the dogs of religion, now become(s) as it were a lost sheep plaintively pleading for the mercy of the master shepherd.” Boyce concludes, **“No English translation can capture Matthew’s careful orchestration of the painful choral refrain. ‘Lord, have mercy,’ the dog’s solo bleating cry. ‘Get rid of her,’ the ‘lost-sheep chorus’ barks back in reply.”** (“Commentary on Matthew 15:[10-20] 21-28” by James Boyce from the website www.workingpreacher.com)

Unfortunately, Matthew does not give us details, which would make explicit the actual dynamics between Jesus, his disciples, and the Canaanite woman. I suggest, **Jesus was, at first, letting the disciples show their allegiance to the same prejudice against foreigners and women, which was practiced by the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law, in accordance with their system of the Law.** So, Jesus did not respond to the woman’s pleas for help until her plaintive requests started to become an embarrassment to the male disciples. **“His disciples came to him and begged him, ‘Send her away! She is following us and making all this noise!’”** Jesus did not, then, say something to the woman but, instead, replied to his disciples, **“I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel”.** **I hope you notice I did not end his response with any punctuation** in what’s projected on the screen. I did that because Jesus could have said those words mockingly to his disciples – revealing what they were thinking or he might have spoken those words as a question to them – challenging the assertion his call was to only minister to the **“lost sheep of the people of Israel”.** **“At this the woman came and fell at his feet.”** The Greek literally says the woman **“worshipped”** Jesus! **“‘Help me, sir!’ she said.”** Again, the literal Greek has her call him **“Lord”.** **Her actions and words indicated a greater commitment to Jesus and his authority, when contrasted with the wining demands of his male disciples!** They issued him a demand and did not call him **“Lord”!** If she had felt degraded by Jesus, then I doubt she would have acted and spoken in those ways.

I suggest Jesus’ ridicule of his disciples was so apparent to them and to the Canaanite woman that she understood what he was doing and went along with the role play. Perhaps gesturing toward his disciples, **“Jesus answered, ‘It isn’t right to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ ‘That’s true, sir,’ she answered, ‘but even the dogs eat the leftovers that fall from their masters’ table.’”**

David Howell makes points like those I have made, saying, “If we continue to think of this passage in terms of its dramatic teaching value, we might conclude that in his response, Jesus held the disciples’ prejudice in front of them like a mirror, taking it to the extreme in this phrase about throwing the children’s food to the dogs. He said out loud what they may have been thinking!” Howell ends, **“It is always a shock, and somewhat shaming, when we hear our prejudice on the lips of someone else.”** (PAUSE) [“Preaching Matthew 15:(10-20)21-28” from the website www.goodpreacher.com by David Howell]

Jesus left the desperate mother an opening and in her self-deprecating response, **“That’s true, sir, but even the dogs eat the leftovers that fall from their masters’ table”** she showed her continuing faith in him. Then, he drove home the embarrassing truth to his disciples, saying, **“‘You are a woman of great faith! What you want will be done for you.’ And at that very moment her daughter was healed.”** Jesus put into dramatic and controversial action the arguments he had earlier made against the Law system of the Pharisees! **It would have been hard for Jesus to have had a bolder and more powerful proof of the greater validity of his authority and of God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial “Agape Love” over against the Pharisees and their Law!**

Instead of following the Law of the Pharisees and the bad example of Jesus’ disciples in today’s Scripture, you and I are called to be transformed – to turn from the self-centered ways of judging, rejecting, mistreating, and oppressing anyone, who is not a carbon copy of ourselves. We are to be God’s agents of Christ to all people – yes, even toward those the Pharisees’ Law and society declares unclean, sinners, unworthy, and not loveable! For those, who have been rejected or mistreated or denounced, you and I are to show self-giving and sacrificial love, forgiveness, acceptance, welcome, and healing – extravagant hospitality! **Allow God’s “Agape Love” and God’s Son, Jesus Christ, to reign over you and the Body of Christ – live out Jesus’ victory over the Pharisees’ Law and their self-serving judgmental way! Amen.**