

**Old Testament Lesson—Leviticus 19:9-10, 33-34**

*When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.*

*When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.*

**New Testament Lesson—Matthew 15:21-28**

*Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.*

As far as Jesus stories go, this one probably won't make your list of top favorites. It's likely, instead, to make a list of stuff we wish wasn't in the Bible. I don't think any of us enjoy thinking about Jesus in this way.

This certainly isn't the Jesus we grew up with—most of us, anyway. This one's much less palatable. He's just not very likable. Right? I mean, we're used to smiling or being left awestruck by the Jesus of the gospels but...this guy? What's with this guy?

Well, this definitely wouldn't be one of the stories I'd start with when introducing someone to Jesus of Nazareth—or Christianity more broadly.

You know: We're used to saying Christ is fully human and fully divine. We've normalized a very complex idea and I think that's a good thing—usually. It's in all our major confessions and faith statements.

But, I'm not sure that we really *mean* it. Or, at least, I'm not sure we're *serious* about all of it. Otherwise, stories like this one wouldn't make us so uncomfortable—so uneasy.

I want us to really think about this for a moment. Do we really mean what we say we believe about Jesus—about Jesus' identity—about who he is? It's an open question...

Strangely enough, I feel like we're better conditioned these days to be open and accepting of Jesus' divine nature—a part of him we can't really begin to understand!

We get pretty jazzed about the miracles, for example. They draw our attention, captivating us in a special way. And make no mistake. Our passage from Matthew's gospel this morning is a miracle story—but not only a miracle story. There's something deeper going on

here if you ask me—something perhaps more important than the healing of a young girl (if you can imagine). There’s something incredibly meaningful happening here with Jesus and his disciples (past and present).

You see: Whenever we come across Jesus’ miracles, we get to ponder their significance more broadly. We get to think about what message Christ might be sending through these actions. We get to think about the context and the people involved.

As believers, you see, we get to move past the obvious first question! Yes, we don’t have to dwell on the “how” of it all! It’s quite the privilege, really. Instead, we get to wrestle with the “why” and learn about the “who,” along with the other w’s.

We can do this because we’re confident in Jesus as divine. We know he’s of God. We know where his power comes from. We know the Source. Right? He can do the things he does because he’s conceived of the Holy Spirit—because in “him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”

He is God’s only begotten Son—the Word made flesh—the LORD incarnate.

And so, we come across all the different miracle stories in the gospels and we think, “yeah, that makes sense.” I mean, why shouldn’t he be able to do all those things?

Why couldn’t he heal the sick or turn water to wine? Why couldn’t he control the weather, multiply food, or raise the dead? Right? This is the *Christ* we’re talking about—the long-awaited Jewish messiah. This is the Savior of the world! This is Immanuel—God-with-us!

So, in that respect, this story’s no different. We see the wonders of divinity on full display here in Matthew. At the end of the day, a woman’s daughter is healed—set free from her torment. And notice that Jesus does this remotely! He doesn’t even have to see the poor girl—doesn’t need to be near her.

Like the Creator of Genesis, Jesus simply speaks; and the power of God flows freely and miracles happen.

The problem I think many of us have, though, is what it took to get Jesus to that point in the story. We often (for good reason) think of Jesus as a healer—someone who liberates those who’re suffering from what ails them.

But a *reluctant* healer? A *hesitant* healer—one who needs his arm twisted before taking action? One who’s got to be convinced before doing something? That doesn’t fit neatly into our prepackaged understanding of who Jesus is.

It doesn’t sit well with us because we know a Jesus that’s always acting out of genuine compassion, empathy, and tenderness. We know a Jesus that does this almost reflexively—without even a second thought most of the time.

When someone’s in need—especially in desperate need—Jesus meets their need—meets them where they are. That’s the Christ we know and love and serve and follow.

But the one who tries to ignore a determined Canaanite mother—well, we don’t know who that Jesus is—“not my Messiah.” We don’t know this person.

We don’t know him. This guy’s mean—even cruel. He insults this poor woman to her face. She is belittled—made to feel small by a group of men. Worst of all, perhaps: she’s… dehumanized. She’s dehumanized. Let that sink in.

As I was writing this, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to use the word, “dehumanize.” I wrestled with the idea. But, what other term would you pick to describe being called a “dog?”

There’s a devastating worthlessness that comes across when Jesus uses that word. Ugh it makes my heart ache to think about it.

Again I ask, “Who is this guy?” Or, better yet, who does this guy think he is? I struggle to recognize him. I think many of us do. We don’t know this person.

But, you know, friends... The wildly ironic truth is that we know this person very well. And that’s exactly what pains us so much about this story.

We *do* know him. We *do* know this Jesus. We know him because he is us.

And when he holds up that mirror to humanity, it’s not a reflection we want to see. It’s one we want to turn away from—to run away from.

For centuries upon centuries, the Church has understood Jesus to be both fully divine and fully human. Last I checked, it’s one of the fundamental principles of our faith.

God became a human being—a real person of flesh and blood—experiencing the good, the bad, and the ugly of all that we are—in order to redeem all that we are.

This is what we *say* we believe. But do we really mean it? Do we?

Either Jesus was an actual human being with all our complexities and messiness or he wasn’t. Either Jesus was a complete person living in the real world—in a real historical context—living in real communities—among groups of flawed people—or he wasn’t.

As we know, real communities with real people are not perfect.

You see: I think we’re fine with Jesus’ humanity as long as that humanity doesn’t include any of the really bad stuff about being human.

We’re okay with the Jesus who grieves and who weeps. We’re fine with the Jesus frustrated and afraid in the garden before his arrest. And we even appreciate the Jesus who loses his temper in the Temple and starts flipping over tables.

But what about the Jesus who’s “raised a certain way” like we all are? What about the Jesus with unconscious bias? With prejudice? What about the Jesus who probably understands his people and country as exceptional in some way? Huh? What about *that* Jesus?

A little too human, perhaps. A little too close to home, maybe?

Again... Either Jesus was fully human, or he wasn’t. And human beings don’t always make the right decisions. Human beings make mistakes and (hopefully) learn from them. Humans put their foot in their mouths sometimes. We hurt people’s feelings. We hurt people.

At least that’s what real, flesh and blood, human beings do. So was he, or wasn’t he?

We *say* he was. We *confess* he was. But do we honestly believe he was?

Well, I’m the one preaching so I’m going to tell you what I think. I think we can and should believe Jesus was a real person—that he was an authentic, true human being like us with good days and bad days. And to take it a step further: I think this is exceptionally good news—great news (in fact) for all of us.

I know this is challenging, my friends. And you don’t have to interpret this story the same way I do. It’s one of the wonderful things about being Presbyterian!

But I’ve seen this text sanitized a number of ways and find none of them satisfying. For example: Jesus and the disciples were conspiring to test the faith of a woman—a faith Jesus already knew was strong enough to take it. So, cruelty for cruelty’s sake, then?

Or, the mother was in on it from the beginning, and this was all an act to teach the disciples a lesson. But that takes away the woman’s agency, and I don’t like that either. This view also makes her sick daughter into some sort of pawn which can’t be the case.

Or how about no one’s in on it and this is just Jesus using divine foresight, knowing how everyone would respond in advance. So it’s all an act for Jesus, then?

No, I think the most logical and the most powerful way to read this part of Matthew is that Jesus encountered a woman he didn’t respect because she was a Canaanite—a people Jesus

was raised to understand as “less than”—the classic antagonist of God’s people since the last days of Moses.

If it helps, think of Israelites and Canaanites like Russians and Ukrainians, Israelis and Palestinians, Hutus and Tutsis—you get it—bitter enemies.

No, I think this entire encounter awoke something in Jesus he never expected. I don’t think even the Son of God saw this coming: a Canaanite woman who would change his perspective and worldview forever...

...a mother who not only broadened his horizons, but also broadened his compassion and empathy...a woman who gave him the chance to practice what he had preached earlier: to love his enemies.

...a desperate woman who would expand Jesus’ understanding of God’s love and create a bigger flock...a woman who taught the Teacher something new: that even those we think are “beneath us” are precious in God’s eyes and deserve more than crumbs from the master’s table.

Siblings in Christ: Like the human Jesus of Nazareth, we too have been cruel. We have ignored the plight of the less fortunate—pretending we don’t hear them. And we have dehumanized so many groups of people.

And yet, there is good news here; because we follow a Savior who was humble enough to change course—who took in new information and decided he would do better—decided he would love bigger. And so can we!

Because we serve someone who learned from his prejudice—who acknowledged his innate bias. This person, Jesus of Nazareth, who was challenged by a desperate mother—this is the Jesus who’s able to lay down his life for everyone, no matter who you are or where you’re from—Canaanite or Israelite—Jew or Gentile—American or otherwise—citizen or sojourner.

Imagine, for a moment, Jesus going to the cross without that inclusive vision of salvation. Imagine him going to die having never come across that brave woman. Imagine his mission—his presence on earth (as he understood it), being meaningful only for a select group of people—the descendants of twelve ancient tribes.

*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*, Jesus had said in the coldest tone he could muster.

May we—like the Lord we love—be open to un-learning all the harmful things we’ve been taught. May we strive to not only meet the needs of those we can help, but to go out of our way to meet them. May we grasp the best parts of being human and notice God’s image in every person.

Thank God for the wisdom and bravery of women. Thank Christ for embracing that wisdom and bravery.

Amen.