

These last couple of weeks we've heard some of Jesus' most famous miracles: feeding the multitude and walking on water. I can't explain the physics of *how* Jesus did those things, but even so, I don't struggle with those stories. *Was Jesus really walking on water or was there a sandbar that the disciples couldn't see?* isn't a question that keeps me up at night. But I do struggle with today's gospel. As our public discourse becomes less and less civil, as people say increasingly dehumanizing things from the relative security and anonymity of their social media profiles, the last thing I want to hear from the gospel is Jesus calling a desperate woman a dog. And I'm not alone. Generations of commentators have tried to save Jesus from himself in this passage: he doesn't directly call her a dog (he just uses it as a metaphor for her whole religion); you love your dog, right? so maybe it's a compliment (that nobody would appreciate); it's the diminutive form of the word, so he's really calling her a puppy, which is cute, not offensive (gentlemen, don't try that at home). Jesus said what he said, so we have to deal with it.

But this scene in Matthew's gospel doesn't start with Jesus calling the Canaanite woman a dog. It starts with the Pharisees accusing Jesus and his disciples of breaking tradition by not washing their hands before they eat. Please, on this picnic Sunday, do not mistake the point of this story as Jesus being anti-hygiene. The Pharisees were referring to ritual hand-washing, and even that tradition served a good, practical purpose; I bet the Pharisees had a lower rate of dysentery than their less-fastidious friends. The problem is their claim that this ritual was not just physically and medically beneficial, but spiritually necessary as well. They believed their traditions made them righteous—and therefore that those who didn't keep their traditions were unrighteous. Jesus disagrees.

This is a place where Christians have often fallen into anti-semitism: we do that when we accuse the Pharisees of being overly legalistic, characterize Judaism as all about rules, or portray Jesus as the inventor of a loving God. No, the law was God's loving invitation for people to live in healthy relationship with God and each other. The Pharisees were striving to apply that centuries-old law to their contemporary lives...which is exactly what all of us are called to do. Where they got off track was thinking that people who practiced the faith differently than they did were disappointing God instead of just disappointing them. Christians inherited that over-zealous perspective in spades...an expression that only works if you weren't raised by folks who thought playing cards is sinful.

In answer to the hand-washing debate, Jesus says you don't defile yourself by accidentally ingesting something bad; you defile yourself by intentionally speaking out of hatred instead of love. The capacity for evil is already inside us; Jesus gives a list of things that are sinful because of how they hurt other people. Those thoughts lead to words, and words lead to actions, so even just speaking those harmful ideas into the world around us makes us part of the problem. Yet the very next thing we read is Jesus denying help to a despairing woman, and insulting her race and religion as he does it.

Matthew calls the woman a Canaanite, but politically speaking, Canaan no longer existed. That term recalls Israel's historic conquest of the Promised Land by waging war and killing, enslaving, or driving out the people who were already living there, the Canaanites. But here's a Canaanite they didn't conquer, in the district of Tyre and Sidon, an area that was traditionally Gentile, not Jewish. Jesus' initial argument against helping the woman is that he was sent to do ministry only among the Jews...yet here he is, outside of Jewish territory. He shouldn't be surprised to find a local Gentile in a Gentile area, and if she's lucky enough to find this miracle worker in her hometown, why wouldn't she ask him for help.

The woman tirelessly advocates not for herself but for her daughter. Jesus first ignores her, then speaks about but not to her, and when she finally kneels right in front of him and forces him to deal with her, he likens helping her daughter to giving the children's—I guess he means the worthy children's—food to dogs. Still, she persists: *even dogs get the crumbs from the master's table*. And she's got him there. Because just one chapter ago, while teaching the disciples that they had plenty to share, Jesus multiplied so much bread that there were 12 baskets full of leftover crumbs. Maybe the disciples missed the lesson of God's abundant goodness, but the woman knows it. Finally, Jesus commends her great faith and heals her child.

So the big question is what really happened here? Did Jesus test the woman, and when she proved her faith, he gave her what she asked for? I hope I don't have to jump through hoops to prove my faith when I'm at my most desperate and begging for help. Did Jesus know all along that he would help her, but first he wanted to use her persistence as an example for the disciples? I don't have much use for a god who would prolong my suffering in order to use my vulnerability as an object lesson for other people. Did the woman, who really wanted her daughter get well, convince Jesus, who really cared more about principle than people, to change his mind? I don't want to have to convince God to help hurting people whom God is supposed to love—or worry that God didn't help them because I couldn't find the right way to change God's mind.

This is tricky territory, as we confess that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. But in this story, Jesus encountered a new person and place of need and—albeit slowly—opened his arms a little wider to overcome manmade limitations and grow in grace. Maybe being godly doesn't mean being static, immovable, and unchanging; maybe being godly means growing more loving when more love is what people need. And if even Jesus had the capacity to grow more loving, more merciful, more inclusive, then surely there is room for us to grow as well. I don't like where Jesus started out in this story, but he ends up where we would expect the Son of a loving God to be—recognizing that no one is beyond God's mercy. May we see which seeds of love in us have yet to grow, and may we be like Jesus, becoming more and more loving for the sake of the world.