

¹⁰[Jesus] called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: ¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." ¹²Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" ¹³He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." ¹⁵But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." ¹⁶Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

²¹Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²Just 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." ²³But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Jesus and his disciples wander into the region of Tyre and Sidon. That might not strike us today as very important, but Matthew's original audience knew what this detail meant: Jesus was now in Paganland. They were no longer in any discernible religious landscape. It was outside the Jewish territory of Judah, and the disciples were now making tracks through a region of unbelief or out-there Roman cults. These disciples probably did not enjoy being there. It was different from their homeland, which meant they were on high alert for anything unusual as they moved through the area with unease.

Just then, a woman -- not just any woman, but a Canaanite woman that they shouldn't associate with -- came running up to them, screaming and shouting that her daughter needs to be healed from the torment of a demon. We know how these disciples felt at this point: They looked at Jesus with eyes that said, "Get us out of here, man." We don't really know what Jesus is thinking. We are left to wonder: *Does he know how this scene will unfold? Is all this a sly way for him to make a point? --Or -- Like his disciples, is he also trying to figure out how to end this uncomfortable situation with this raving woman? Is he second-guessing his decision to enter the region of Tyre and Sidon?* His silence not only leaves us wondering, it left his disciples wondering, too. "Send her away." "Get rid of her." "She's bothering us."

Finally, Jesus says something; "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." To be honest, such a statement from Jesus can be disheartening for us. It effectively says that he does not need to help this woman or her daughter because they weren't born inside the right borders. Plenty of ink has been spilt by scholars trying to figure out this whole passage and what it means about Jesus. One end of the spectrum of speculation says his divine self had all this play out according to plan, the other end of the speculation says he was waist-deep in the misogyny and xenophobia of his day. To be honest, the truth could be anywhere in between. We don't know and it will always remain unsettled. What we know, however, is that to this point in Matthew's gospel, all of his ministry has been focused on the Jewish people.

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," he says, before continuing, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." It doesn't matter when or where or by whom it was said; comparing a woman to a dog has always been offensive. The woman's response can be heard as a desperate plea, or as her standing her ground for some dignity in a system of misogyny, or perhaps both. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." And with that statement, Jesus changes course.

What has taken place in this conversation was a divine page turn. His purpose up to this point in the gospel was about being the Messiah of the Jews. Jesus was doing just that; ministering to and among the people of Judah. Yet God the Father worked through this Canaanite woman who

rushed toward them screaming about her daughter's demon. It was through this mother that God revealed to Jesus that now is the time to broaden the ministry's vision.

You see, Israel itself has a unique purpose: when God made a covenant with Abraham, God promised Israel would be a blessing to all other nations. The question since then has always been "how does that get accomplished?" As Israel's Messiah, it's time for Jesus to expand the scope of his ministry to fulfill this covenant with Abraham. It's finally time for God to fulfill the promise made long ago to Abraham, that Israel -- through its Messiah -- will be a blessing to all nations. It just took an easily overlooked Canaanite woman to be the sign that now is that long-awaited time. Her stubborn, motherly, pleading insistence is God's manifest sign that it is finally time for Israel to be that blessing to all nations. The vision of Jesus' ministry is expanded through her.

That's how our God likes to work, I believe. Taking what is low and finding ways to bring out grace and new ministry. We had one of those low moments with a situation that hit close to home for us this week. It's still too fresh for me to expound upon it at this moment. I'm reminded of a refrain that is commonly shared in Black congregations. The speaker says, "God is good," and the congregation replies, "all the time." Then the speaker says, "All the time," and the congregation replies, "God is good."

God is good // all the time.

All the time // God is good.

When I read about this Canaanite woman and her tenacity to demand acknowledgement from a group of men who want to disregard her and her ill daughter, I am reminded that she must have known a low that is lower than anything I've ever gone through. Yet God was able to do a lot through her. Out of her struggle and burdens, Jesus' ministry was expanded and grace was revealed. Even when our hearts ache, even when we feel like the wind has been kicked out of us, God is still good. God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good. Even out of our lows and our worst experiences, God can do good work, graciously opening paths for new ministries of care and love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.