What Jesus Learned on His Summer Vacation

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers at Light Street Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, on Sunday, August 17, 2014.

Matthew 15:21-28

“It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs!” What on earth was Jesus thinking? A woman comes to him, begging him to heal her daughter. And Jesus gives her the brush off? Not only that. He insults her! He basically calls her a dog! What happened to the Jesus we all know and love? Where is the care and compassion that we’ve come to expect from Jesus? This exchange seems so out of character for him!

I’ve always been troubled by this scripture passage. But as I’ve wrestled with it, I’ve come to see it in a new light. Of all the stories about Jesus in the Bible, I’ve come to see this one as showing him at his most human -- warts and all. It is a story about Jesus’ humanity. It is also a story about a Gentile woman’s persistent and unshakable faith in Jesus. And it is a story about Jesus’ learning from the faith of that Gentile woman.

To put the passage in context, at this point in the gospel of Matthew, we find Jesus having a particularly rough time in his public ministry. He had had a couple of run-ins with the Pharisees, who were plotting to destroy him. His predecessor, John the Baptist, had been beheaded by Herod, which didn’t bode well for Jesus’ future. Everywhere he went, he was followed by crowds seeking healing and miracles. It was dangerous to be so popular. Hard as he tried to get away, the crowds kept finding him. He went back to his hometown, only to be rejected by his friends and neighbors. And just before this passage, Jesus has a confrontation with the Scribes and Pharisees in which he tells them off. They accuse Jesus and his disciples of going against the tradition of the Jewish elders. And Jesus comes right back at them, condemning them for going against the law of God. This is not the way for Jesus to win friends and influence people.

Needless to say, with all of these things going on in their lives, Jesus and his disciples really need a vacation. So they go away together to the district of Tyre and Sidon, located along the southern coast of what we now call Lebanon. I like to think of Jesus and his disciples staying in a little guesthouse right on the coast with a nice view of the sea. They’d be soaking up some sun at the beach, maybe doing some sailing, getting some reading in, feasting on seafood, and enjoying the sunsets over the Mediterranean. (Then again, I could be projecting -- just a little. I go on vacation tomorrow.)

This was the only time that Jesus left the boundaries of the Holy Land proper. He went north to Gentile country, presumably because he thought the crowds wouldn’t follow him there. We know from the account in the gospel of Mark that Jesus entered a house and didn’t want anyone to know where he was staying. He wanted to get away from it all, far away from the crowds and the hostility of the Scribes and Pharisees. He wanted some peace and quiet and some time alone with the disciples (who still weren’t getting his parables).
But of course, someone does find him. A Canaanite woman from that region comes out and starts shouting at Jesus: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”

At first, Jesus ignores her. He doesn’t answer her a word. I can imagine him thinking to himself: “Oh no. Not again. Yet another person looking for a miracle. If I heal this woman’s daughter, she’ll go and tell all her friends and family just like all the others did, and we’ll be inundated with requests for help. The crowds will be back, and I won’t get a moment’s rest. I’m on vacation. I shouldn’t have to deal with this. She can surely find someone else to heal her daughter.”

But the Canaanite woman is not easily discouraged. She persists to the point of making a nuisance of herself. With Jesus ignoring her, she cries after the disciples too. And they start complaining to Jesus, begging him to do something to get rid of her.

So Jesus finally says to the woman: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Jesus was on a mission from God. And he clearly saw his mission to be to the Jews. I don’t think Jesus ever thought of himself as starting a new religion. He thought that he was simply calling his fellow Jews back into faithful relationship with God. That’s why, earlier in Matthew, when Jesus sends out the twelve disciples to preach that the kingdom is at hand, he tells them not to go among the Gentiles or the Samaritans, but to go only “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Jesus believed that his mission was first and foremost to his own people. He believed that the Jews were God’s chosen people, that they were God’s instrument for saving the world. He was also a practical man. He didn’t want to spread his energy too thin. So his initial answer to the Canaanite woman is: “Look, you’re a Gentile. I’m not here to help Gentiles. I’m here to help Jews.”

But the Canaanite woman won’t take “no” for an answer. Her daughter is very sick and she believes that Jesus is the only person who can help her. He is her only hope. She kneels at Jesus’ feet and pleads: “Lord, help me.”

Now Jesus is really irritated. He’s tried to ignore her. He’s explained that his mission is to the Jews, not to Gentiles like her. And now she’s down on her knees before him. Jesus finally loses it: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Such harsh words. How could Jesus be so insensitive to this woman to put her down like that? I even hear a tinge of racial prejudice in Jesus’ words. The woman was a Canaanite. The Canaanites were the ancestral enemies of the Jews. They were a people of reproach. They were “dogs” in Jesus’ words.

Now you would think that at this point, the woman would get up and tell Jesus off: “How could you say such a thing to me, with my daughter so ill? And to think I put my faith in you!”

But amazingly, the Canaanite woman shows no sign of taking offense at Jesus’ words. She is single-minded in her pursuit of Jesus’ healing power for her daughter. She has the presence of mind and a quick enough wit to come right back at Jesus and turn his metaphor on its head: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”
What more could Jesus say? She had him. She had worn him down with her persistence. But more importantly, she pushed Jesus to struggle with a dilemma. Here before him was a Canaanite woman, a Gentile, who showed more faith than some of the chosen people. Did God intend him to fulfill his purpose through the Gentiles? He sure was having problems getting his message of good news through to the Jewish leadership. Perhaps his ministry was not meant only for the Jews. Perhaps he was to minister to all people.

And so in the end Jesus responded to the Gentile woman’s faith, saying: “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Now what can we learn from this story?

First, setting aside for the moment the divinity of Jesus, at the very least we can say from this passage that Jesus was certainly fully human. He got tired and burned out. And when he did, he went on vacation -- or at least he tried to. He had a temper and sometimes it flared. He was apparently not free from prejudice. He was not all-knowing. Rather, he learned things along the way, just as we all do. He struggled with questions we all have struggled with at one time or another, like “What am I doing with my life?” (“Am I supposed to be working only with Jews, or am I supposed to expand my ministry to include Gentiles as well?”)

I find this heartening. I feel much closer to Jesus when I think of him in human terms. In many ways, it’s hard to be a follower of Jesus, but it’s just a little bit easier when I realize that Jesus was fully human, with all the frailties that go along with being human.

Second, we can learn from the example of the Canaanite woman how to be more faithful followers of Jesus ourselves. The Canaanite woman had tremendous faith. She trusted in God’s power as it was manifest in Jesus. And her faith was tenacious. She persisted in her faith, despite the obstacles put in her way. She was ignored, given the brush off, discriminated against because of her race, and insulted, but still -- she kept on keeping on. Her faith was unshakable. Contrast this with the faithlessness of the people of Israel, who, after God had delivered them out of Egypt, promptly forgot what God had done for them, rebelled against God, and tested God every chance they got. The bold and indomitable faith of the Cannanite woman stands in stark contrast. We would do well to follow her example.

Finally, the third thing that we can take from this story is what Jesus learned from his encounter with the Canaanite woman. Jesus learned that Gentiles could have faith in the God of Israel. He realized that Gentiles could be receptive to his message, and that therefore his ministry might be meant for all people -- not only the Jewish community. This foreshadows Jesus’ later commissioning of the disciples (found at the end of Matthew) to go and make disciples of all nations. Jesus’ ministry became radically inclusive; he opened himself to all people.

And so, we, as followers of Jesus, are called to reach out to all people as well. We are called to reach out across lines of race, class, religion, nationality, and sexual orientation, lines that so often divide us. We are called to reach out to the HIV-positive man who finds himself homeless and unemployed, to the undocumented immigrant
from Central America who can’t buy a bus or train ticket without a photo I.D., and to
the young African-American lesbian couple looking for a place to get married.

A few years ago we went through a discernment process to identify our values as a
congregation. The values we came up with are now posted outside our church door.
One of the values we lifted up was inclusivity: “Affirming God’s love and purpose,
Light Street Church values inclusivity -- offering hospitality and respectful welcome to
all who seek God.”

This value has been central to our church’s identity for more than a decade now.
Indeed, our church’s mission statement, written several years ago, says that “We open
our hearts and doors to all in our community who seek God,” and “We maintain our
commitment to being an inclusive church.”

What’s more, we have chosen to be very public about our commitment as a welcoming
and inclusive congregation by displaying 8-foot-high rainbow banners on the front of
our church building. We do so because rainbows are signs of God’s covenant with the
earth and all living things; they are symbols of racial and ethnic diversity; and they are
expressions of welcome to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community. So it
should be no surprise that our congregation has grown in its diversity. I can’t tell you
how many people have said to me, “We saw the rainbow banners and we knew we
would be welcome!” Word is getting around! Light Street Presbyterian Church is a
congregation that welcomes everyone!

Jesus offers us a vision of an inclusive church, a loving church, a welcoming church,
open to the whole people of God, male and female, young and old, rich and poor, abled
and disabled, liberal and conservative, gay and straight, black, brown, yellow, and
white. That is the vision we hold for this congregation as well as for the wider church.
And it is my sincere hope and my fervent prayer that this congregation will continue to
grow into that vision in the months and years to come. May it be so. Amen.