

Matthew 15:21-28
August 20, 2023

Trending

In all the time that human beings have inhabited earth, there have been two trends associated with their relationships. The first is away. It can be thought of as geographical, but sometimes is simply relational. The generally accepted notion is that from one, the human population has grown to its present number of around 8 billion people.

During most of that time people have been spreading out, moving as far away from other people as they possibly could, filling up the inhabitable regions of the earth, far enough to develop different languages, religions, cultures, and to never see or even be aware of some of the other civilizations, in other places.

The other trend is in the opposite direction; towards. For the last 5,000 years or so, but specially the last 500, people have been bumping into one another, interacting, trading, integrating, fighting. There have always been, I suppose for a long time will be, disagreements about how to handle the situations that arise from these encounters.

How much heritage can be preserved and how much newness can be accepted? The question is whether to keep separate or integrate. The solution is some of both, a kind of middle ground where some aspects of one's heritage are maintained, while new relationships and traditions arise. In any case, one must not think of these processes as easy. They are anything but easy.

It is not surprising that we see these dynamics played out in the Bible. Whether it is the Egyptians, the Philistines, or the Canaanites; the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, or the Romans, Israel keeps running into her neighbors. Almost the whole of the biblical story is concerned about such things.

This topic, of seclusion or inclusion, integration or segregation, purity or participation, is reflected throughout the biblical story. In recent history, the trend of moving towards has by necessity become dominant. Thus it is at least as, probably more, relevant today than in biblical times and stands as one of the many ways the Bible is applicable for today.

As central a theme as there is in the Bible regards the New Testament description of the relationship between the Jewish and the Gentile populations. And here in the Gospel of Matthew it is found in the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite Woman.

Much can be said about this encounter. She is described as being from the region of Tyre and Sidon. It is not too much of a stretch to say that she was probably of a higher socio-economic station than Jesus and his companions, but comes into relationship to Jesus because she a desperate mother. Her daughter was sick, suffering from possession. In this circumstance she was willing to swallow her pride and approach the Galilean Jewish miracle worker.

The response of Jesus is interesting and, quite frankly, a little troubling. We want to see Jesus as being

gracious in every situation and most of the time he was. But in this case he appears unkind. She asked for help and he initially tells her no, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel,” and, “it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”

The question of the Incarnation arises. Humanly speaking, is Jesus subject to the prejudices and grievances of his community, as they bumped into people from other places along the way. If so, does this attachment minimize the sense in which he is also sinless? And if he is not, would that lack diminish the sense that he is human?

For most of Christian history, theologians have been arguing about these things, so that in our text this morning we are not only confronted with the acceptance of Gentiles, but also the whole question of the Incarnation, which leads to the Doctrine of the Trinity. And you thought this was a simple story.

Let me suggest that it provides an opportunity to better understand God and salvation. The reason why the church rejected the notion that Jesus was not really human, which was the first great heresy in the history of Christianity, is because if he was not, if he did not participate in life the way we experience it, then he did not overcome the temptations we face, thus could not by his sacrifice, bring reconciliation.

This story, rather than presenting Jesus as sinful, presents him as *overcoming* the prejudices and of his people, providing an example for us of how to act

when we encounter people from whom we are estranged by history, or geography, or economics or politics or culture.

How Jesus overcame this situation is worthy our attention, for it gives us not only an example to live by, but also helps us to interpret our life experience, and to better understand God, and salvation. *Let us look closely.*

For her response was not only of a desperate mother, willing to do anything for her daughter, but it was a also a faithful response, and in the context, a humorous one; for in a self-deprecating way, she conceded to Jesus that she was not the right fit to receive his help,

“Yes Lord,” she said, “but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

Not only does this speak to the universal experience of dog owners that their dogs will eat anything that hits the floor, with the possible exception of the their own dog food, but also to the sense in which the point Jesus is making is not relevant to the situation. What was relevant to the situation was a girl who was sick.

And then what must have seemed a remarkable event happened. We can speak of this miracle in terms of what Jesus noticed. First, and this may require an inference, he saw the humanity of the situation, that on the level of parents caring for their children, we are all connected, there was no distinction between

Jewish and Gentile, there are no distinctions at all. He saw a young girl he could help, not a Gentile girl, just a girl.

That was the first thing he noticed. The second thing does not need to be inferred, for lurking just beneath the surface of the mother's desperation, was her faith. For all the differences and all the things set against them to divide them, he saw something central to all human experience, and that is *faith*, which he could not deny. *She believed he could help her.*

Earlier in Matthew, there was another Gentile, a Centurion as a matter of fact, whose servant was ill to the point of death, and who came to Jesus for help, not requiring Jesus to be present, but only to speak the words of healing. And the response of Jesus in that case seems appropriate here . . . , "I have not found in all Israel anyone with such faith."

Among the experiences that unite human beings across all the divisions are; pain and suffering, and here the concern of a parent for their child, and faith, or at least the possibility of faith found, astonishingly, everywhere, even in people we have learned to believe are not capable of faith. So he healed the girl and overcame one of the negative aspects of his upbringing.

Sometimes we get such opportunities, let us be ready for them in the spirit of Christ, who shared *our* humanness, without being diminished by it, thus

making reconciliation a reality for us, as well as for all the Canaanite women in the world, and all the rest.

We are trending toward . . . May we be trending in the spirit of Christ, our hope and our salvation.

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