

Course Correction or Short-Term Change: Jesus and the Canaanite Woman - Matthew 15:21-28

There have been times God acted to change the course of His Kingdom in ways both large and small, subtle and not-so-subtle, most always due to operator error on the part of his followers. There was the Emmaus Road encounter that finally placed Jesus as both resurrected, and alive, and the Messiah of Israel. To say the disciples and those closest to Jesus had been skilled at missing this point would be an understatement. There was the fantastic Pentecost experience that saw the age of the Law give way to the age of grace and, in time, the church age. There was also the woman with the hemorrhaging issue that highlighted the rigidity of the law that perennially punished the sick and excluded them from faith practices. That negative changed when she touched the tassel of his shirt.

Each course correction signaled movement toward a new normal. Each old norm was being replaced by a new reality. Change doesn't always lead to seismic shifts; however, there were times change functioned as an early precursor of things to come. Matthew's description of Jesus' encounter with the Gentile Canaanite woman is a prime example. This is a very complex story so let's set the stage.

Chapter 15 has Jesus going back and forth with the Pharisees on what constitutes clean when it comes to eating and/or the washing of hands. The Pharisees are letter-of-the-law strict and Jesus counters by saying what one says with one's mouth is more important than what one eats with one's mouth, which causes the Pharisees to go into a complete dither. Out of this comes the classic Jesus line: "If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit." Hard to beat that for a line of wisdom. Sad to say but that was the highwater mark for chapter 15. Jesus and the disciples take a long trip to the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon where they are met by a Gentile woman with a demon possessed daughter. As you're reading the scripture remember this trip was a full fifty miles from Jerusalem. They were a very long way from home.

Then Jesus left Galilee and went north to the region to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Gentile woman who lived there came to him, pleading, "Have

mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! For my daughter is possessed by a demon that torments her severely”. But Jesus gave her no reply, not even a word. Then his disciples urged him to send her away. “Tell her to go away,” they said. “She is bothering us with all her begging.” Then Jesus said to the woman, “I was sent only to help God’s lost sheep - the people of Israel.” But she came and worshipped him pleading again, “Lord, help me!” Jesus responded, “It isn’t right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs.” She replied, “That’s true, Lord, but even dogs are allowed to eat the scraps that fall beneath their masters’ table.” “Dear woman,” Jesus said to her, “your faith is great. Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed instantly. Matthew 15:21-28

O.K., this story is more than complex, it’s unsettling, difficult to come to term with, and, disturbing on many levels. As one writer who chose to write under the name *anonymous* states, Jesus comes across as “arrogant, racist and just plain mean.” I’d write under that *nom de plume* as well if I used those words to describe Jesus. I’m willing to cop to being confused by this encounter. It’s obvious Jesus does not come off well in this story, nor do the disciples, but what’s new there. They tend to go with the prevailing wind and spend more time oblivious than obedient. The woman is the true star of this narrative and she is the sole reason that Jesus makes a short-term shift in God’s plans, one that is a preview of what is in store for all people in the not-too-distant future.

So, who was this woman? Mark tells us she is a Syrophenician, or a Canaanite. Matthew wrote a distinctly Hebrew-themed Gospel account to a distinctly Hebrew audience. Knowing this makes his use of Canaanite all the more important, although by the time of Jesus Canaan was no longer a place on a map or a definable people group. Canaan existed long before Israel and they were natural enemies, often fighting over the same land. Sharing turf came to a violent head when Israel finally entered the Promised Land. Deuteronomy 7 instructs Israel to take the land from the Canaanites and exterminate all of them, plus any other native peoples. “Destroy them completely. Make no treaty with them and show them no mercy.” This obviously harsh directive was given to ensure Israel

wouldn't (again) take on the gods of the Canaanites (Baal) or the other people groups.

Matthew's language places her as "one of them," as the "other," at a time when the Jews had little to no trust in non-Jews. Despite the fact there were no Canaanites living in the first century, Matthew paints her as being a complete outsider. Apparently so did Jesus and the disciples when she first approached them.

What did she want from Jesus? Two things have been established: First, this woman is a Gentile; and second, Jesus is in Gentile territory. Jesus and the disciples are on this woman's turf. Here's the kicker: she uses the language of a knowledgeable Hebrew, a knowledgeable spiritual Hebrew, a knowledgeable, spiritual and Messiah-expectant Hebrew. She says, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." The timing is amazing. There is an amazing juxtaposition at play here. On the heels of the Jewish leaders rejecting Him, a pagan Gentile woman was calling him by familiar titles, seeking healing mercies. Her daughter was suffering from demon possession and she was certain Jesus held power over demons. It should have been the other way around. It was supposed to be the other way around.

What did the disciples say? This one is easy and true to form. "Uh, Jesus, this pagan woman is scary. It's not like we wanted to come here in the first place. Please get rid of her!" She is undoubtedly shouting loudly and since Jesus is remaining silent the disciples take the easy route: "Send her away, she's still following us and calling out." They are far outside their comfort zone and they realize they are not in their homeland. But, they must be wondering, how does she know so much about Jesus?

Jesus speaks. We have now entered the disturbing portion of our journey through chapter 15. Jesus does not say, "I understand your pain and fear, and because you know Me your daughter is released from her possession." Instead he says, "I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel." Translation please. Jesus is reiterating the command of Matthew 10:6-7: "Do not go near the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this

message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’” Israel was called to be God’s holy and priestly people and Jesus was Israel’s Messiah. Israel first, all people to follow. In plain terms, first things first.

The woman persists. She does not give up. She comes to Jesus and kneels at his feet and says, “Lord, help me.” She does not use the language of a non-Jew foreign pagan. Thus far she is the most truly spiritual person depicted in the entire chapter (outside of Jesus of course).

Jesus speaks again. And you thought this conversation was disturbing a few sentences ago! Jesus is hard to defend at this point as he says to her, “It is not right, you know, to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Many a commentator has tried to polish this line to make it more palatable, but he said it, he literally used the term dog in reference to this pleading woman. It is true that he used a diminutive form signifying small dogs or puppies rather than wild scavenger dogs, but Jews routinely used *dog* as a pejorative for Gentiles. This would not have been lost on her, nor Jesus, nor the disciples.

Back at you. David Turner in the *Tyndale Cornerstone Biblical Commentary on Matthew* writes:

Despite the pejorative nature of Jesus’ response, the woman amazingly persisted in yet a third plea for her daughter. This time she even adapted Jesus’ metaphor to her own needs and extended it, accepting her place as a dog but requesting his mercy nevertheless as a dog might beg for table scraps (212).

Carla Works in *Working Preacher* writes:

The woman, however, is not deterred. She claims a place in the household, but it is not a position of privilege or even the position of an insider. She accepts the status of a family’s dog by claiming that even the dog enjoys crumbs from the table. Her statement is striking. She places hope in what others have discarded. This Son of David has so much power that there is enough for the house of Israel and more than enough left over for her. She is not trying to thwart his mission. She just wants a crumb, recognizing that

even a crumb is powerful enough to defeat the demon that has possessed her daughter.

Jesus is moved by her persistence and her amazing faith perspective. She knows her place in the pecking order of salvation. First to Israel, then to all people, but in the course of this encounter, God/Jesus makes an exception for the woman and her daughter. Deb Beatty Mel writes, “In that exception, the future breaks in to the present, and we can glimpse what God has in store for those who believe and follow. He is more concerned with matters of the heart than with ethnic boundaries.” This statement would ring true sooner rather than later. The Resurrection would mark a permanent change/course correction in a matter of weeks. Dr. Beatty Mel adds, “Finally, we can take away the knowledge that we serve a God who is both faithful to His promises and full of surprises.”

Ain't that the truth!

Takeaway: God has been known to make seismic moves to correct the course of His Kingdom. God also enacts short-term, temporary changes that may or may not, at some point, become permanent. We should be bold enough to ask God for actions outside the established norm, expectant enough to believe God will act, absolutely giddy when God surprises us and patient when we do not see God act. We can't lose sight of the “outside the norm part.” If it happened all the time where would the surprise be?

Pray as if we can shape tomorrow and the future.

Pray wisely – Believe we can shape tomorrow and the future.

Allow God to work – In the short term and the long term.

And,

Remember: God's been at this much longer than we have.

Amen and Amen

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