

Well Behaved Women Seldom Make History

^{NRS} Mat 15:21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.²² Just 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."²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Jesus had such an interesting family- especially when it came to the women. Rahab, for instance, was a prostitute. When the Jews were invading Canaan two spies wisely stopped at her place knowing all kinds of men showed up there, and no one was likely to question them much or acknowledge them if they saw them on the streets. She helped them and was spared when the troops came. And Ruth? Ruth was a Moabite, an outsider, who seduces that nice Jewish boy Boaz after getting him crocked in the barn after he was tired from working all day. And although we have all these nice images of Mary in blue and looking all demur- in reality she was a pregnant teenager who ended up marrying a man who was not even the father of her child.

So, it's no wonder he was so comfortable with people that made the nice church folk around him so nervous- the prostitutes, their customers, the diseased, and basically anyone who didn't really fit in and didn't have the resources to hide it. He came from a family of these people- he knew these people. But even Jesus seems caught off guard by this uppity woman from Canaan.

Maybe it's because she's a Canaanite. Jews were particularly uncomfortable around Canaanites- not only did the Jews take their land by force, but the Canaanites had

a particularly exciting religious life with sensual fertility gods and goddesses and a rich history of ritual, temple prostitution where sexuality was actually considered a form of worship. You know, of all the ways I've heard of growing a church... Just for the Presbytery record I'm kidding, of course. ☺

Maybe it's because she was so bold as to come to him when he was hiding out. Jesus had just been sparring with the Pharisees, was tired, and she opens saying he and his friends *anachoreisin*'ed themselves out of there. Our translation just says they went away, but *anachoreiso* is a really specific word meaning to withdraw, to go on retreat and get out of dodge. So it's not just that she's approaching him, but she's crashing his alone time. That would certainly get on my nerves.

Or maybe it's because of the way she talks to him- using all this religious language that is totally not part of her world. She calls him 'Lord', and 'Son of David' - words that may be theologically correct but sound so strange coming from her. I know I always get a little nervous whenever I'm around someone who is always throwing religious language around, like "The Lord showed me this and that" or quoting scripture left and right. One of the things that is MOST annoying about being a pastor is when someone changes who they are when they find out what I do. Like all of a sudden all their 'gods' turn into 'goshes' and they just turn into the *niciest* people. And it's like they don't get I'd MUCH rather be around real people who aren't perfect than around fake people pretending to be. Or, if they are going to put on an act they could at least do a better job of faking it. ☺ I wonder if all these 'Lords' and 'Son of Davids' got on Jesus' nerves. Like when someone comes to pick up your daughter for a date and they're full of

‘sirs’ and ‘yes ma’ams’ ...it’s like no one is that nice and it just makes you nervous about who they really are.

Well, I have no idea what it was about this woman that got underneath Jesus’ skin so much, but something did. The first time she approaches him, she says: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” And his response? He doesn’t say a word. He doesn’t say a word! He just turns his face and walks away. He doesn’t return her phone call, her email, her text message- there is no passing go, there is no collecting 200 dollars. There’s just silence.

Now I don’t know about you, but this would be hard to take. For me it’s a lot easier if someone just comes right out and says they aren’t going to help me than if they just kind of keep stringing me along or don’t even let me know where they’re at. Because then you start worrying- did I say something wrong? Did I do something wrong? Are they mad? Are they having a bad day? And you have no idea- because all you have with them is this big silence.

So this big nothing, this big brush off- this would probably be enough for most folks to get the message that Jesus isn’t interested. But this woman we’re dealing with here- she’s something else. Because she’s not put off by Jesus’ rudeness. She doesn’t even leave. She stays. In fact she makes a stink. Enough so that the disciples actually go to Jesus and complain, telling him “Get her out of here, she keeps shouting at us.”

I love it. You know, I’ve never been a protest kind of person. I’ve always been a work within the system kind of person. And I think there’s merit to this. Sometimes when folks get caught up in protest movements- it’s really more about them and their

needs than it is about getting things accomplished. But my mom has been helpful at reminding me that without folks like Martin Luther King Jr., without folks like Rosa Parks, heck without the founders of this country, without these incredibly courageous folks who announce whether in deed or act that they're mad as hell and just aren't going to take it anymore, that a lot of the change we're so grateful for- it just wouldn't have happened. And so here's this woman, not only not backing down, but actually turning up the volume. So much so the disciples are complaining to Jesus, who is turning around to them saying, "Hey, my mission is to the Jews- not to the Gentiles." Like, "Hey, she isn't in *my* job description."

But even this, even finding out Jesus doesn't even consider her worth his time, she goes to him *again*, this time laying herself out in front of him saying the most simple thing you can imagine: "Lord, help me." Writer Anne Lamotte famously says the two most helpful prayers she knows are: "Help me, help me, help me; and thank you, thank you, thank you!" ☺ She also talks about a friend of hers with a prayer life that goes like this. Her morning prayer is "Whatever" and her evening prayer is "Oh, well." And if you think this isn't prayer, think again. It's a heck of a lot more faithful than so many of our well crafted but essentially careful and empty prayers we come up with in seminary.

So this woman lays herself out, physically and verbally, saying simply: "Lord, help me." Can you imagine anyone being any more exposed than this? And how does Jesus respond??? It's incredible. He says: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Now, the church gets REALLY nervous about Jesus right here. You wouldn't believe the amount of ink that's been spilled on this verse- most of it trying to explain away what Jesus is saying, saying that what he's saying is really much nicer.

For instance folks point out that Jesus uses the diminutive word for dogs here, *kunarion*- so he's not saying "Dogs", like big, smelly, junk yard dogs; no, no, he's talking about cute little puppies...nice little lap dogs. Oh please. Or people will say, well, the phrase was probably just a common phrase of the time, and he never actually calls the woman a dog. And...yeah, I suppose this is true. Jesus doesn't actually tell the woman *she's* a dog. But in the analogy between Jews and the non Jews and between children and the dogs...this woman sure ain't one of the children. No, to me there's no way of spinning this to make Jesus look all nicey nice here.

But what's ASTOUNDING about this text is how the woman reacts. Me? I would have been gone at the silent treatment probably, but if I would have hung in there- this would absolutely be the last straw. You're saying I'm not a child but a *dog*, Jesus? Are you kidding me? And I thought you were different. My feelings would be hurt, and I would probably react to this.

But her? Our wonder woman? What does she do? She doesn't even blink an eye at this, but stands her ground and actually agrees with him. "Yes," she says. "Sure," she says. "Whatever," she says. But then that's when she lets him have it. She says, "But, even the dogs under the table get the crumbs when the kids are eating." And if any of you have eaten at our home, you will know how right this woman is- whenever we eat Rigby, our black lab, sits at permanent attention right between Ella and William knowing her chances with the kids are always good.

This woman hangs in there with Jesus and gives as good as she gets. Almost as if she's watched Jesus spar with the Pharisees, she accepts what he says, but then tilts it just slightly to reveal something not apparent at first. And Jesus, overjoyed at this woman's

tenacity, his eyes sparkling at her quick mind, names what this woman dishes out at him faith. Can you imagine it? This annoying woman, interrupting their quiet time, from another tribe, an enemy tribe, given every social clue including an insult to her face- she keeps bugging Jesus, and bugging him. And he doesn't call her uppity. He doesn't say she has forgotten her place. He doesn't say she's a witch with a 'b'. He looks her up and down and says, "Great is your faith!"

So what do we make of this? Well, I know I'm supposed to be impressed by Jesus and to figure out some way that he's really nicer than he seems, say that his healing at the end makes up for his rudeness at the beginning- but I have to confess that I'm really more taken with this woman.

One of the things she teaches us is to remember we don't always have to like people to get along with them. We don't always have to like one another to get along. This is so hard, especially for us in the church. We have all been taught that being Christian is essentially about being nice- where we get this idea I have no idea. It's certainly not in the Bible. Jesus is consistently harsh with people- this text being a good example of this. Now, I'm not saying Jesus is mean or out to hurt people- just that he prefers being honest with folks rather than just telling them things that'll make them happy; remember he tells us to love our enemies, not to like them.

In October of 2008 Charles Roberts broke into an Amish school house and ended up killing five girls as well as himself. But none of us hardly remember this- I didn't even remember his name, I had to look it up. What we remember is how the Amish community responded. It would have been perfectly reasonable for them to respond with

anger and hatred- to decry his family and the world around them that produced such a person. But they didn't. As a community they mourned by forgiving him. A grandfather of the one of the murdered girls led the whole community, writing, "We must not think evil of this man. He had a wife, a soul, and he now stands before a merciful God." The community actually set up a fund for the killer's family, attended his funeral, and invited his wife to the community memorial service for the children, one of the very few outsiders ever to be granted such a privilege. Now I imagine they did not like this man or his family. And I know they hated what he did. But they knew Christ's words, and they knew they didn't have to like these people to act in love.

I imagine this woman could have spent her entire life with Jesus and the disciples and they wouldn't have gotten along. Whatever it was about her, her pushiness, her shouting at them- it seems like the only fair way of reading this text is to say that Jesus and the gang didn't like her. They just didn't. Even Jesus didn't like everyone, apparently. But, she didn't let this get in the way, and in the end- neither did he. In fact in the end he seems so won over by her tenacity. I imagine him laughing out loud when he tells her how blown away he is by her faith.

You don't have to like everybody folks- we're just not built like this. Sometimes people remind you of someone that hurt you- sometimes you can't even say why you don't like someone. This is just how we are. But just because you don't like someone, or just because you get the feeling someone doesn't like you- this is no reason not to keep at it with them and see if there isn't something good that can come from it.

The other thing that gets me about this woman is her ability to stay so focused. She stays focused on what she wants and who she is even in a strange place and even when the people she's going to for help aren't being at all helpful at all. Another way of putting this is she never takes the bait. I mean every step of the way this woman is being tested- with silence, with being insulted, but she never takes the bait. She never let's her feelings get hurt and just quits. She keeps hanging in there trusting in Jesus- even when there's no apparent reason to do so.

The church I pastored before coming to you was new church development- meaning my job was to take a handful of people and work with them to develop a viable congregation. The Presbytery, in its infinite wisdom, paired us with two congregations that theologically and politically couldn't have disagreed more with one another. It was like they thought that if the fighting parents had a baby, then everyone would love each other again. Yeah, that's always worked out. So anyway, the pastor of the church that was theologically more conservative, he was very concerned about my politics. And he kept trying to nail me down on specifics- and I kept telling him I felt my job was to build a congregation and focus on what we have in common, not on what keeps us apart. And while sometimes I wondered if I shouldn't be more up front, most of me still believes this was the right stance to take. My job was to build a church; not to convince people my theology was right. Well, finally, one day after we were at a gathering with some other pastors, and after the meeting he cornered me out in the parking lot- where the 'real' meetings so often take place. And he said to me, and I'm not exaggerating- he said, "There's a vote in Presbytery that's coming up and it's important to me how it goes. If I can count on your vote, I think our church will be able to really help you." Now, his

church had a TON of money- they had an annual budget of 4 million dollars. And the Presbytery had no money to offer our little church, so we really were looking around for folks to help with land and what not. So I'd be lying to you if I told you I didn't have to think about what he said for a minute. But, then my better angels kicked in, and, feeling like Jack Nicholson out of A Few Good Men, I told him the truth, and the truth was not only did I think what he was proposing beneath contempt, but I told him I didn't intend on voting that way and in fact very strongly supported the other side. And then in a fit of theological pique I fired off five or six reasons why I was all right and why he was a pin head. I remember my face feeling flushed I was so mad. But then the strangest thing happened. He just smiled at me. He wasn't mad. He wasn't upset at all. He just smiled, and he said, "Hey thanks Ken, that's all I needed to know." And he walked off, and I was left standing there in that parking lot. And then all of a sudden I felt REALLY, REALLY young. Because it dawned on me that he wasn't actually offering anything in exchange for my vote, he was just trying to provoke me a little bit- trying to see if he could flush me out, trying to see if I would take his bait, which of course I did, jumping at it like a small mouth bass.

For a long time I was mad at that guy. Mad at him for tricking me. But you know, he wasn't being all that mean- he was just doing what big church pastors do and will always do- he was just trying to minimize his risk and not funnel a whole bunch of money into something that was going to embarrass him at some point. He was just being himself. And I let myself forget my real purpose, which wasn't to grandstand and get all huffy, but to be faithful to my flock and to love this guy- even if I didn't particularly like him.

It's so easy to be provoked by others, to be insulted by others, and then get drawn off the pathway we really want to be on. And we always get mad at them, and we tell our friends about what a so-and-so this person was to us and all- but you know what? At the end of the day, we're the ones stuck in a spot we don't want to be in; and these people we complain about so much? They really only have the power over us we allow them to have.

You know most of the time in church we think we're supposed to be nice and cheerful- but if this isn't working for you, maybe we should try being pushy. If being all lukewarm and careful isn't working- try being annoying. Your family, friends, and your pastor may not appreciate such a faith- but, if it is for love, for justice, well in the eyes of Christ, it just might seem great. **Amen.**