

The Jesus I don't want to follow

Associate Pastor Adam M.L. Tice

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Matthew 15:21-28

A few weeks ago, I asked Cindy if we could switch up the preaching schedule a bit for my convenience. She was willing, so I began to prepare for today. This was a case where I really should have looked at the lectionary BEFORE asking for the date. The Gospel passage this morning turns out to be one of my absolute least favorite bits of scripture.

What do you do with a story where Jesus acts like a jerk? This is one case where those WWJD¹ bracelets are no help at all.

There are several options for dealing with difficult texts. I won't bore you with long descriptions of "historical-critical interpretation," rhetorical or redaction criticism, but all of those jostle about as I try to approach texts like this.

First I have the temptation to dismiss the text. There are several possible approaches to take here. First is to question the historical validity of the passage. We could say, "That doesn't sound like Jesus, so Jesus must not have said it." Or we can find other historical arguments as to why this quotation snuck into the canon. Personally, I don't find that approach terribly helpful. Sure, it is fascinating to speculate as to what is historically accurate, but I think conflating 'historically accurate' with 'valid and useful' misses the point of the canon of scripture.

In my experience this type of criticism is most inclined to dismiss passages with which the critic is uncomfortable or disagrees. This is why, for

¹ "What would Jesus do?"

example, I would be tempted to dismiss this passage of Matthew. Additionally, without the Bible and the tradition of the Church, we have no other option for encountering the 'historical' Jesus. The writers, editors and early worshippers in the church found this passage to be illuminating, so it was included in the Bible. Whether or not it accurately reflects a historical incident, it is part of the church's collective wisdom about Jesus. I do not out of hand dismiss that type of criticism; I simply don't find it personally useful. As a pastor, I want to commit to you that I will engage with the Bible on its own terms. For me, that means taking each passage seriously and attempting to allow the scripture to speak, even when it is difficult or down-right offensive.

I tell you all this to explain why I even bother with this nasty little passage. If I can't dismiss this narrative, what do I do with the fact that Jesus calls the Canaanite woman a dog?

Part of my difficulty here is one of perspective. I'm a Christian, so I'm supposed to imitate Jesus. But the Jesus I want to follow doesn't act like the Jesus in this passage. It reminds me of an image I saw in a church recently. A very large, imposing, not-to-mention blonde Jesus, is standing with his arms up and out looking very cranky. There are even flames coming out of his head. I commented to Maria that if that is Jesus, I don't want to be a Christian. I like the Jesus of John chapter 4 better. It is a similar encounter to today's passage; Jesus meets a Samaritan woman, and is really nice to her. He reveals his messianic identity to her and makes her an evangelist.

I can happily identify with that Jesus. He's much friendlier than Matthew's version. He is radically inclusive, engaging in conversation with a woman, a Samaritan, who had been abandoned by a string of husbands. She was nearly as low on the social ladder as anyone could be. I learn from Jesus to reach out to the outcast without regard to status or social convention.

Back to Matthew though — it seems as though I get the complete opposite message. Here we have a woman, a Canaanite. Not quite as much of an outcast as the Samaritan, but close enough. Jesus does not reach out to the woman — in fact, she has to come to him and make a scene before he even takes notice of her. He does not have kind words for her — in fact, he basically calls her a dog. He doesn't meet her needs at first, but only after she seems to out-wit him. When he finally affirms her faith and heals her daughter, it seems to be as much because she wore him out as because of his goodness.

Jesus is a jerk.

If what we are supposed to learn from Jesus is that we are to reach out to and accept the outcast, then I'm getting mixed signals. How are we supposed to imitate this Jesus?

Here's where I have a confession to make. I realized in the process of preparing for this sermon that I was starting with a flawed assumption. I think it partly relates to being a white, straight male. I approached this story with the narrative assumption that I am supposed to identify with Jesus — to imitate Jesus.

What does that assumption do to this story? It allows me to place myself in the position of authority. It prompts me to identify the woman as “other.” Something different and outside of me. I then base my reactions to the story around the insider-outsider dynamic. I, white, male, straight, pastor, religious authority, American, middle-class, educated, dashing handsome, identify with Jesus, and so I am inside the circle. Everyone else is outside.

If you follow that line of reasoning, you will see why I have so much trouble with this passage. I, as privileged individual, have assumptions based on other passages about exemplary Jesus as to how I am to relate to the “other.” Those assumptions do involve subverting privilege and the acceptance of the other, but they begin with the construct of in and out, us and them, even holy and unholy. In this passage, the exemplary Jesus does not act according to my script. My privilege-based assumptions are challenged, and I am offended. Jesus does not treat the “other” as one with privilege is supposed to.

From a narrative standpoint, my interpretation really missed the boat. This wasn't a story designed to help me as a person of privilege learn how to relate to people without privilege. In fact, it is the other way around. The protagonist of the story, the mover and shaker and the one worthy of emulation, is the woman. After all, Jesus praises her for her great faith at the end of the story. It is not enough, and perhaps it is even demeaning that my first reaction boils down to “isn't it nice that EVEN SHE could have great faith!”

How, then, can I enter into her story? How can I learn to identify with her?

The first hearers of this story would have recognized the woman's behaviors as liturgical actions. Her first phrases and movements mimic those that the earliest Christians practiced in church. Her opening phrase is "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." A moment later she kneels and says, "Lord, help me." These are actions of uninhibited worship.

Her words also imitate the form of many of the Psalms; especially the Psalms of complaint. In these, the singer calls out to God, describe God's character, and demand that God act according to that character. A good example is the first part of Psalm 5:

Give ear to my words, O Lord;
give heed to my sighing.
Listen to the sound of my cry,
my King and my God,
for to you I pray.
O Lord, in the morning, you hear my voice;
in the morning I plead my case to you, and watch.
For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;
evil will not sojourn with you.
The boastful will not stand before your eyes;
you hate all evildoers.
You destroy those who speak lies;
the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful. (NRSV)

Like the Psalmist, the woman in Matthew calls out to Jesus, and she uses titles that identify his character. And like the Psalmist, she speaks with the absolute confidence that he will act according to that character, even if he doesn't know it yet. She doesn't give up, even when he dismisses her.

The barriers, the inhibitions and the social constraints that were designed to keep this woman from Jesus could not silence her. She knew God's character and she knew that God's character defined Jesus.

So here we have a woman calling the traditional religious assumptions into question, insisting upon her own dignity and demanding that Jesus act in accordance with his own character.

It amazes me to realize that this God of the Psalms and this Jesus we find in Matthew could be moved by prayer. These petitions are spoken not in the assumption that God will do whatever God will do anyway, but with the confidence that God acts in response to human freedom. Jesus changed course and blessed the faith of a non-Israelite woman, though it initially seemed like a distraction from his primary mission.

Although it has helped me to reframe this story, I am still left with a lingering annoyance about Jesus' behavior. It frustrates me. But I think that it is a reminder about the risks of incarnation.

Jesus was made flesh as a first-century Jewish male. The Word was incarnate in a particular time, place, culture and religion. Those constraints made the gospel more easily accessible to some, but presented barriers to others. They clearly should have been barriers to the woman in this story. Jesus acted according to the conventions of his incarnation — he responded as any other 1st century Rabbi would. But the woman demanded that he transform those incarnational restraints. She called him to be incarnate for all of humanity, not just for Israel.

In the same way, the church continues to incarnate. We give flesh to the body of Christ in our world, here and now. We do so within the constraints of culture, race, gender, orientation, class, religion and geography. These are good

things, to be sure, but they can also be limiting things. Do we assume that the specificity of our incarnation defines God — that God looks like us? Do we believe the manipulations of culture, politics and religion when they tell us that God does not hear us? Or do we embrace the incarnation as a reality of humanity as a whole — the promise that all people, even we — can come to grow more fully into the image of God?