

"Response to Faith"

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Let's open our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, bless us with your miraculous response to our faith. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.**

I read that there was a sign in an office building bathroom, "Toilet out of order – please use floor below." In the office kitchen, it was posted, "After use, please empty the teapot and stand upside down on the draining board." There was also a sign in a local laundromat, "Automatic Washing Machines: please remove all your clothes when the light goes out."

Jokes are funny because they take advantage of different understandings and different expectations. But have you ever had one of those conversations where there's a frustrating misunderstanding, or you say something that you think is funny and it offends someone?

As we read the passage from Matthew this morning, did anyone find it a bit offensive, Jesus ignoring the Canaanite woman's pleas and then referring to her in a metaphor as a dog? It doesn't initially seem like the caring and compassionate Jesus, the Son of God who miraculously heals the sick, who teaches us about the love of God, and who dies for us on the cross.

Matthew tells us that a Canaanite woman from the district of Tyre and Sidon shouts at Jesus to have mercy on her because her daughter is being tormented by a demon. But Jesus doesn't answer her. The disciples urge Jesus to send her away. They're annoyed. Then Jesus says to the disciples that he was sent to the lost sheep of Israel; a reference to the Good Shepherd looking after the Israelites. This woman doesn't give up though, and she falls to her knees and pleads to Jesus, "Lord, help me." Then Jesus speaks to her for the first time with a troublesome metaphor, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." And then she cleverly replies by developing the metaphor further, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Jesus

interprets this as great faith and the woman's daughter is healed instantly! What an unusual little passage this is:

- Is Jesus referring to the woman as a dog?
- Or is Jesus referring to the Gentiles as dogs?
- Or is Jesus prone to human fallibility and changing his mind?
- Or are we missing something?

We jump to conclusions about prejudices, racism, human fallibility and changing our minds because they're all so much a part of our human lives. We read these things into the text because we see some of them in ourselves and in those around us. Try as we might, we still mess up sometimes: say some dumb things, make some people angry, and change our minds. Little indiscretions that can grow into major feuds.

One of the most famous feuds was the conflict between the Hatfields and the McCoys. The Hatfields, led by their patriarch Anderson Hatfield lived on the West Virginia side of the Tug Fork River, and the McCoys, led by their patriarch Randolph McCoy, lived on the Kentucky side. Both families were in the lucrative timber business. The feud seems to have begun in earnest when Randolph McCoy accused Floyd Hatfield of stealing one of his hogs and took him to court. The judge, a Hatfield, ruled in favour of the Hatfields so two McCoy brothers murdered the key Hatfield witness. Two years later, Ellison Hatfield was mortally stabbed and shot in a brawl with three of Randolph McCoy's sons. Anderson Hatfield took matters into his own hands and had the three sons killed. The feud grew from there. Over 12 years, more than 12 members of these two families lost their lives in the famous feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys.

There was a similar feud between the Israelites and the Canaanites, that seems to date back to the Old Testament days of Noah. Noah had three sons and the youngest son was called Ham (no relation to the Bacons). It's a complicated story, but Ham was ostracised by his family and Noah cursed Ham's son Canaan. The descendants of Canaan, the Canaanites, were thought by the Israelites to be cursed; idol worshipping pagans; innately wicked and subject to demons; an accursed race from the very beginning.

Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon is also told in the gospel according to Mark, which is believed to have been the first gospel written, sometime between the years 66 and 70. The period between the years 66 and 70 coincides with the Jewish war with the Romans that ended with the Romans destroying the temple in Jerusalem. Tyre was a wealthy, predominantly Gentile city on the Mediterranean coast. The Tyrians were bitter enemies of the generally poorer rural Jewish people in the area and when the war broke out many Jewish people were killed and imprisoned. Tyre is almost always referred to in the Bible in combination with the nearby city of Sidon, named after Canaan's firstborn son. The readers of Mark's gospel, as well as Matthew's gospel a little later, would have found the thought of Tyre and Sidon as repugnant as Sodom and Gomorrah. In going to the district of Tyre and Sidon and in speaking with this Canaanite woman, Jesus is crossing many social, political and religious barriers. Jesus is in potentially hostile territory, women were not supposed to speak alone with a man they didn't know, women were not supposed to speak first, the woman rudely yells at Jesus, and the woman is a cursed Canaanite from the district of Tyre and Sidon where the Jewish people are being brutally oppressed. Jesus is allowing all of these social rules to be broken as he talks to this Canaanite woman.

But even in these circumstances, why would Jesus make the unusual comment to this woman about dogs? One possibility is that at the time of the Jewish war, the slang term often used to refer to adversaries was "dogs." There are lots of references to enemies being called dogs in the Bible. Interestingly though, the derogatory Greek word for a filthy, scavenging street dog is *koo-ohn* whereas Jesus uses the word *koo-nar-ee-on* which is a little dog or a puppy; a house pet that is fed, cared for and loved by the family.

Another interesting possibility is that the woman might have been a Cynic. At the time of Jesus, Cynics were a well-educated group of Gentile men and women philosophers. Their practices were in many ways similar to the followers of Jesus: they pursued a life of virtue, they didn't have possessions, they believed that the world belongs to everyone, and men and women are equal. The name 'Cynic'

comes from a Greek word for 'dog' or 'dog-like.' Jesus might have been acknowledging the woman as a Cynic, and that's why she's OK with the dog metaphor and holds her own in a philosophical discussion with Jesus.

There are several possibilities and we don't have to entirely figure it out. It's clear that Jesus praises the Canaanite woman's boldness in seeking his help, praises her quick wit, and responds to her faith. While Jesus often speaks in parables and metaphors, the Canaanite woman is the only person in the Bible to speak to Jesus using a metaphor. Jesus must have marvelled at her willingness and ability to respectfully engage with him on an important matter of mercy. Maybe Jesus sees in her the characteristics that he would like to see in all of his disciples: men and women who have strong faith in God and can rise above social, political and religious barriers. The Canaanite woman rises above social, political and religious barriers and cries out to Jesus, "Lord, help me." She believes that God's mercy is for all people and has great faith in Jesus' power to heal her daughter.

Last week, when Peter began to sink as he walked upon the stormy sea, he cried out to Jesus, "Lord, save me!" Today, the Canaanite woman cries out to Jesus, "Lord, help me." It's very similar. The main difference is that Peter had just tried to test Jesus: "If you do this, I'll do that; "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." The Canaanite woman, on the other hand, does not say to Jesus, "If you are the Son of David, command my daughter to be healed." Instead, she cries out to Jesus with great faith in Jesus' power of God to heal her daughter.

Jesus takes his ministry outside of traditional Jewish territory and he reaches out to answer the pleas of a Canaanite woman of great faith. Jesus reaches out to all of us in our times of difficulty, in stormy seas and beyond social, political and religious barriers to save us all – it's God's response to faith. Thanks be to God. Amen.