Sermon for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost

August 16, 2020

Matthew 15:21-28

A few weeks ago, I was watching a lecture, and the speaker said something that has stuck with me.

She talked about how every Christian is a theologian, whether they realize it or not, because each of us has a personal theology, our own way of understanding who God is and what God is like. Lots of things can influence that personal theology, like being a part of a denomination, when and where you live, what your life experiences have been like, but the biggest clue comes from answering one question:

What’s your favorite Bible story?

She said that examining that story would lead us to seeing how we understand who God is and what God is about. And that’s theology.

Today’s Gospel reading just happens to be my favorite story in the Bible. Knowing that it was coming up allowed me to spend some time over the last few weeks dwelling on what this story means for how I understand who God is and what God is about.

My first real encounter with this story was about 12 years ago, at a workshop led by a seminary professor. When he got to this story, he told us that it shows Jesus moving past the bias he and other Jews had toward Canaanites and Gentiles in general, and that Jesus delivers a horrible insult to the woman by comparing her to a dog. She persisted in calling out to him, so he tested her faith to see if she was willing to hold her ground. Because she was strong in her faith, he changed his mind, and said she would have what she wanted.

I didn’t agree with him. How could Jesus possibly have bias toward someone? Isn’t it more likely that he was testing the disciples, helping them see that God could offer mercy to Gentiles, as God had done before?

He said that Jews didn’t like Canaanites, or Gentiles in general, so it was understandable that Jesus would have absorbed the prejudicial thinking of those around him, and that we should remember that Jesus was a product of his upbringing.

I said, “Yes, but that upbringing includes being the Son of God.”

He rather diplomatically moved on to the next topic.

My interest in this story has grown over the years, because, for a seemingly simple story, there are a lot of moving parts, a lot of things that can be understood in different ways.

I’ve encountered plenty of commentaries that agree with me, that strengthen my interpretation of this story, that Jesus was using the encounter as a teaching moment for his disciples, in advance of giving them the Great Commission and sending them out into the world.

However, I’ve also encountered plenty of commentaries that agree with the professor, or are somewhere in between. It’s tempting to only read ones I agree with, to skip over arguments I don’t agree with. This story reminds me to be careful about being open to different interpretations, because they show me the ways other people understand God.

Unlike with some stories, with this story, regardless of how you understand all the variables, the bottom line is still the same – Jesus praises the persistent woman for her faith and agrees to do what she asks of him. He offers her mercy.

When I think about the stacks of books published on the Gospels, on the culture of Jesus’ time and place, and the different lives of the people who wrote those books, it’s no wonder that there are differing interpretations of this short story and of pretty much everything else in the Bible.

Each of us comes at Scripture from a different perspective. But, while we can offer support for our interpretations, the reality is that none of us can be absolutely sure we have the right interpretation, because that assumes there’s only *one* valid interpretation for a passage.

When it comes to this story, we weren’t there to witness the interaction. We weren’t there to ask her if she felt insulted by Jesus’ comment about throwing the children’s food to the dogs, or to ask Jesus why he said it, if he meant to insult her.

We weren’t there to ask the disciples why they asked Jesus to send her away, to ask them if they thought it was OK to ignore a woman pleading for mercy, or if they thought Jesus should respond to her pleas for her daughter so she didn’t have to embarrass herself in public any longer.

Because the bottom line is pretty clear – Jesus praises her faith and extends mercy toward her – some of these questions don’t matter a lot. But that doesn’t stop us from making assumptions about each person as we read about this encounter.

And the bottom line isn’t always clear in Bible stories, so we have to be careful about how we interpret them, and what we understand about God because of them.

Over the last few weeks, I’ve come to see that part of my theology is that I don’t have to have all the answers, and maybe it’s enough that I’m not just asking questions, but trying to find the *right* questions to ask.

And part of my theology is tied to Jesus commending her for her faith. It’s her faith that makes her persistent, leads her to loudly insist Jesus pay attention to her and offer her mercy. It’s her faith that makes her humble when she addresses Jesus as “Lord” and “son of David” and kneels in front of him. Her “persistent faith stands its ground against all opposition,”[[1]](#footnote-1) even kneeling in front of him so he can no longer ignore her.

That this woman is an outsider has to also be a part of my theology. As a Canaanite, a Gentile, she was outside of Jesus’ intended audience. I believe that Jesus allowed this encounter to be a teaching moment for his disciples, and that Matthew included this in his gospel, because they knew it’d be hard for Jesus’ followers to live out the Great Commission, hard for them to extend mercy to others, without moving past their own biases first. And *that’s* something the professor and I agreed on.

Just like the disciples, we have to move past our bias that allows us to think less of people for whatever reason, that allows us to justify treating people with contempt, as less worthy, so we can extend mercy toward them.

Having spent these past few weeks dwelling on this story, I feel like I have a deeper understanding of what I believe to be true about God. I encourage you to dwell on your favorite Bible story, to consider the variables in it and the different ways they can be interpreted. To think about what that story would tell others about how you understand God and what it means for how we live out our lives of faith.

Because, whether or not you realize it, you are a theologian and the things you think about God are important.

1. James Boyce, *workingpreacher.org*, for August 14, 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)