



Crossing boundaries

Rev Cate Thorn

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Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Matt 15:10-28

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‘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.” But he did not answer her at all.’

This is not a pleasant portrayal of Jesus ‘He did not answer her at all’. This woman was so far beneath his radar that she did not even register. When the disciples intervene, pleading with him to respond, it is only because the woman is being a jolly nuisance and they want Jesus to send her away. When Jesus responds he does so obliquely, not actually addressing the woman ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’.

For the writer of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus had come primarily for the Jewish people of Israel. Jesus was the **Jewish** Messiah. The purpose and intention of Jesus’ mission was to secure Israel’s redemption. Canaanites were Gentiles, which was reason enough for Jesus’ silence and unwillingness to engage. But, further compounding the social and religious barrier between them, this Canaanite addressing Jesus was female. From the outset of this passage, Matthew’s Jesus is not concerned for this Gentile woman. Not only is she not part of this divine plan, but she also threatens to intrude across established boundaries and expectations.

This exchange follows immediately the one where Jesus has been berating the Pharisees for their intentional misinterpretation of the

commandments of God. The Pharisees, those to whom Jesus **has** been sent, are choosing correct observance of ritual action and purity rites as their priority, as being in keeping with the traditions of the elders. And conveniently avoiding the costly heart of the Law.

Counterposing the accusation of Jewish infidelity with the story of a Gentile Canaanite woman addressing and identifying Jesus by Jewish Messianic title, even though she's not Jewish, suggests change is afoot. Though not Jewish, this Canaanite woman **sees** Jesus. Discerns that through him healing and wholeness for her context will flow.

Despite being twice ignored the woman persists. Kneeling before Jesus, she lays her need down. Vulnerable before him, she asks, 'Lord, help me.' This time Jesus does respond. But far from the compassion we might expect, Jesus reveals a harsh contempt for the woman and her request. He all but calls her a dog. For the predominantly Jewish audience Matthew's gospel was speaking into, this image is deeply offensive. One used to describe unworthy or hostile outsiders. As far as Matthew's Jesus is concerned, it would be wrong to squander the sustenance of the next generation, the children's food, on those outside the boundaries of the household of Israel. The abundance of food generated from just five loaves and two fish that fed five thousand just a week or so ago, is only for those deemed worthy to receive it.

Still the woman remains, persistent and resilient. Her need is not for herself but for her daughter. She trusts her discernment. Insists Jesus has capacity to respond and meet her need. She argues that even dogs, those unworthy or hostile outsiders, **are** present at the Master's table of bounty. They may be dogs, but they know who their Master is. The same One who is parent to the children being fed at the table. The Canaanite woman recognises the life-bringing possibilities present at the table of God, even if only in the crumbs that fall from the table.

And, quite suddenly, Jesus seems to shift. As if recognition is triggered and he sees her for the first time. Jesus responds to the Canaanite woman, still obliquely, it's not exactly personal. Jesus affirms her great faith. Faith that will make real what she asks. Instantly her daughter is made whole.

The Canaanite woman saw Jesus. Despite his prejudice against her. Despite his rejection of her, she persisted. Trusting her perception. She knew what she saw in Jesus would meet her need. Jesus does change. At least his choice to respond does. Perhaps in the woman's need being realised, what she saw in Jesus was also realised.

There's something about this interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman that makes me curious. If she knew what she wanted and had sufficient faith for it to come about, why did she need Jesus?

To know she and her need was seen and heard? Did transformation happen upon mutual recognition, we assume these stories teach us of God.

We know within Jesus' lifetime on earth that he was fully human. Tradition asserts this. But the stories we hear are told looking back, after Jesus' death and resurrection. The stories that gathered around Jesus became the gospels within the context of communities. Not randomly, but with intent to persuade, to point to Jesus as God incarnate. Almost inevitably, then, as we listen to the gospel, Jesus might just be a bit God for us, not fully human. So, when today's Jesus, resistant to hear and heal an outsider, changes through the press of human insistence, might this be proposing that humans can influence God to change?

Perhaps today's gospel test what we deem permissible in God-human relationships. Dare to propose **humans** can reveal to **God**, God's boundedness. If so, the top-down power dynamic respectfully

attributed to God, gets untethered. Almost to suggest that revelation of God emerges in the interplay of God-human relationship.

But **is** today's gospel about **God** changing? Or might we be being pointed to consider how God becomes ensnared in and by our habits.

Today we've two quite discreet stories, read together. Consider their positioning: the questioning of the **intent** of the faithful practice of insiders; then the faith of an outsider that effects healing and wholeness. Might we, who are insiders, be given cause to examine **our** practices of faith.

Like the accused Pharisees, have our habitual practices of faith become performative and self-fulfilling. It's a right and good thing that we express our faithfulness in familiar form and rhythm. But have we become lulled by this. Immune to the inbreaking, living God. Who bewilders, confounds and challenges us as to how we're to live, how vulnerable we're willing to be, who our protecting boundaries exclude. Sufficient to sustain us in the regular run of life. Until the irregular, unexpected breaks in and they are not. And we cry out, desperate to know our need is heard, that we are seen. And the God we seek and plead for slips free from our constraints, or maybe we're released to see, encounter the living God.

In such moment may we remember what we may have come to forget. The **heart** of the incarnation, to be fully alive to the presence of God, risky as that may be, for then the life of God comes to life in our world. This is our call to participate in this.