

Last fall the Go Tell It In the Mountains initiative asked us preachers to record short videos about the upcoming Sunday's gospel—one for each day of the week—so that by the time you heard a sermon in Sunday worship, you'd have already been thinking about the story for days. And at first, many of us participated, so many that preachers went to sign up for the Sundays they wanted and were disappointed to find that those dates were already claimed. But after that initial response, most of us sort of forgot about the program, or figured other people were still signing up, but nobody was. A couple weeks ago the directors contacted a few of us, asking us to start recording again, so the videos will resume this Tuesday. Even though there probably would have been enough time to start with this week, somehow none of us signed up to talk about this Sunday's gospel, which is probably one of the hardest stories for preachers, because no matter how we look at it, we have to acknowledge that Jesus says something truly offensive to a poor woman who was just trying to help her sick child.

We could try to justify Jesus comparing this woman and her daughter to dogs, as a test of the woman's faith, but I'm not sure how that makes it better; in fact, the idea that God would test us by afflicting our children to me makes it worse. Or we could argue that Jesus was using this interaction as a lesson for his disciples, which again, exploiting this woman's pain, and her child's very life, in order to catechize someone else would still make Jesus cruel. We could find an example in the woman's tenacity and persistence, but in general we're not called to imitate the other characters in biblical stories—at least not in contrast to God; we're supposed to be disciples of Jesus, imitating his example. So let's assume we're *not* called to imitate the part where he responds to a desperate, grieving mother by calling her and her child unworthy dogs; what then *are* we supposed to do with Jesus in this, his least admirable moment?

Even without his harsh words, we should be surprised at Jesus' reluctance to help when for chapters Matthew has been telling stories of Jesus feeling gut-wrenching compassion for people in need, healing and feeding thousands of them at a time. Here we read that Jesus has left Galilee, where he was ministering to his fellow Israelites, and has traveled to Tyre and Sidon, a predominantly Gentile area. Jesus initially ignores the woman's plea because, as a Canaanite, she's ethnically and religiously a stranger. But that's a bizarre reason for him to refuse her, seeing as *he* is the foreigner in *her* community. Yet we know it's her ethnic and religious background, not her faith, that is the issue, because she still addresses Jesus as *Lord, Son of David*.

Of all the times the disciples struggle to understand Jesus, they pick this moment to follow his lead. *Send her away*, they say, *she keeps bothering us*. And Jesus explains to them that he won't help her because his mission is to the nation of Israel, of which she is not a part.

Nevertheless, she persists in asking for his help. Again, there is no nice way to spin his response, that since she is an outsider helping her would be wrong because it would be like taking food from children and giving it to dogs. But even after that insult, the woman does not give up. *Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table...* She's not asking for much—not the meal he just fed to the multitude, not even the leftovers from that meal, of which there were 12 baskets; just the crumbs. She's not asking to detract from Jesus' ministry to the people of Israel—after all, he's not even among the people of Israel. She is asking for just a little bit of the healing that she has heard or somehow knows he has accomplished for other people.

The gospels often record Jesus arguing with the scribes and the Pharisees—the experts on God's law. We tend to read that as Jesus criticizing the religious experts, but those debates were a normal part of teaching and learning. Most of the time, Jesus goes back and forth with the religious leaders to challenge their assumptions. Here, he spars with the Canaanite woman, and *she* challenges *Jesus'* views, and wins the argument! *Woman, great is your faith!* Jesus says. That's quite the compliment, considering that Jesus routinely describes his own disciples as having not *great* faith but *little* faith. Jesus grants her wish and heals her daughter.

This story is tricky, because if Jesus wasn't making the woman beg as a test of her faith, and it doesn't seem like Jesus would do that, and if Jesus wasn't using the woman's desperate circumstances and her ailing daughter to prove a point to his disciples, and since they show no reaction, we can surmise he wasn't doing that, then the most logical explanation is that the woman has changed Jesus' mind...and that makes a lot of people uncomfortable. I understand how Jesus being fully divine complicates the idea of him being wrong, but even if we are not willing to say that Jesus was wrong, then we may at least say that Jesus grows more merciful, more compassionate, and more gracious over the course of his encounter with this woman. And maybe that's the point: since Jesus is fully human as much as he is fully divine, Jesus has to grow, because growth is built into the human experience. We don't always like to grow, because growth can be uncomfortable; we don't usually like to change, because change can be scary and hard. We certainly live in a society that tells us never to admit we're wrong, or accept accountability, or apologize. But if Jesus, God incarnate, can move from excluding this woman because of her differences to praising her faith and addressing her need, then surely we, too, have room for growth. Surely we can be more inclusive; surely we can expand our vision of who God has sent us to love. This story really isn't that hard to understand...but it can be hard to put into practice; it demands that we grow in humility and compassion—countercultural values to be sure. Yet here we can see that Jesus, who came to share this human experience with us, was even willing to grow with us: thanks be to God we don't have to do it alone.