

Discipleship in the Lectionary - 08/20/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, August 20th

Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28

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Faith and mission

The Gospels are full of people trying to unsuccessfully argue with Jesus and I suspect that many of us have attempted something similar in our own faith journey. There is, however, a single recorded example in Scripture of someone who successfully argued with Jesus – not an educated scribe or Pharisee, not a rich ruler, not a high priest, not a Roman governor but a Canaanite mother who features in the primary Gospel lection this week. This encounter says much about the seriousness with which Jesus pursued His mission and much about the nature of the faith that Jesus desires us to possess.

Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28 Commentary

After the feeding of the five thousand (14:13-21), walking on water and calming the storm (14:22-33) and the healing the sick in Gennesaret (14:34-36), Jesus ends up in a confrontation with Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem over His disciples failing to respect the tradition of the elders. In this confrontation Jesus calls out the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees (15:1-9) and then explains what defiles a person to the people – it is not what goes into the mouth but what comes out of the mouth since it reflects the heart (15:10-20). Legalism and the self-serving piety of the scribes and Pharisees, even if sincere, has destructive consequences for the community. Jesus shows us the kind of piety God desires – not the individual practice of purity rituals but the kind of piety that transforms relationships and builds community. After this deteriorating relationship between the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus withdraws into Gentile country.

²¹ *And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.*

Following on from the discussion of purity rituals, Jesus withdraws to Gentile territory. Withdrew (*anachōreō*) is the same verb used to describe the wise men fleeing from Herod (2:12) and when Joseph, Mary and Jesus flee from Herod (2:14-14). This term is used in conjunction with the threat of death or serious conflict. Matthew as a Jew writing to an audience of Jewish Christians would have easily understood the implications for Jesus, a Jewish Rabbi, entering Gentile territory. It would be ceremonially defiling for any devout Jew to enter a Gentile home.

²² *And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon."*

Again, Matthew indicates the woman is not just a Gentile but a Canaanite. The original audience would have known of the relationship between Israel and Canaan. This dates back from the condemnation of the Canaanites

by Noah as the descendants of Ham and the original inhabitants of the promised land. To make matters even more remarkable relative to social conventions of the time, this is a woman talking to a Jewish Rabbi. Yet the utterance of the woman demonstrates her faith. “*Son of David*” refers to the legitimate heir of King David and thus the Messiah. In Matthew, this title is used when Jesus cures blindness (e.g., 20:30-34). This Canaanite woman can see more clearly than the scribes and Pharisees.

²³ But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.”

Some may find Jesus’ response to be troubling. He completely ignores the Canaanite woman. She persists with her pleas to the point where Jesus’ disciples plead with Him to send her away.

²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Jesus responds with an explanation that gives some insight into His behavior. Jesus was relentlessly focused on His God-given mission. This woman appears to not meet the God-ordained criteria for Jesus at this stage in His ministry.

²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶ And he answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

Even this is not enough for the woman. She persists. This time she kneels before Jesus and calls Him Lord. The word rendered as kneel (*prosekuneō*) refers to the act of worship. This is the same posture the leper took in 8:2 when He asked Jesus to cleanse him. The woman’s plea now becomes a prayer. Jesus uses the image of the children’s bread to refer to God’s provision for His chosen people. The Jews sometimes referred to Gentiles as “dogs,” so the word is relevant to both the Gentile woman and a household pet. It is not right to take God’s promise of provision for His chosen people and throw it to the Gentiles. Jesus ignored then rebuffed, and then finally insulted the woman.

²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

The woman is still not through. She acknowledges the insult and then counters using Jesus’ symbolism to her own advantage. *Yes, Lord, I am a dog so give me the crumbs!* She places her hope in what others have discarded. Where else has Jesus seen such persistent faith? Jesus commends her great faith, and her daughter is cured at that same hour.

The Gospel of Matthew will close with the Great Commission, to make disciples of all nations (28:18-20). This woman helps the original audience of Matthew’s Gospel to understand why.

Reflections & Application

In our culture, a strong woman who challenges convention and is persistent enough to achieve her goals is nothing newsworthy. However, Matthew’s audience would have been shocked at these events. Some scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem had just challenged Jesus over His disciples’ lack of respect for the tradition of the elders. The encounter with the Canaanite women further emphasizes the point for the audience. Where the scribes and Pharisees are wrapped up in their own tradition, a Canaanite (and a female one at that) has the type of faith, revealed by her actions, that Jesus cannot find among the children of the promise. This encounter reveals the difference between empty purity rituals and a pure heart.

What Jesus did find among the scribes and Pharisees was a passion for the human traditions that ultimately gave them social status. Perhaps it is not all that different today. Some mistake church membership and church status for a relationship with Christ. Others coopt Christ's name in support of their brand of social activism. The Canaanite woman's actions reveal a desperate faith. What do our actions demonstrate about the nature of the faith we possess? Are we placing our trust in God or the church, the political system or in ourselves?

Many find Jesus' behavior in this encounter to be disturbing. They find him rude, to say the least. Another way to frame this encounter is how Jesus' behavior reveals the intensity with which He pursues His mission. In our culture, social convention often trumps mission. We are sometimes more driven by what people think than by what God requires. In this encounter both the woman and Jesus had their mission firmly in their sights. Can we say the same? What do our words and behavior reveal about our mission?



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