

Gospel of Matthew

“Teachable Moments”

By Jim Best

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In the world of education there is a concept called the teachable moment. The idea is that there are specific times, precise moments, when learning can take place, if the opportunity is presented. It is one of the thoughts behind activities like the Wednesday night movies we did over the summer with the youth. The idea that when they see something in a movie, if we take advantage of it, it can become more than just a scene in a film, it can become a teaching moment.

Today's Gospel reading is one that has caused a lot of problems for Biblical scholars. Jesus does not seem to be at his best in this story. In fact, if you look at the description of this event in the Book of Matthew, Jesus comes off as even more of a jerk. I mean here this woman is, coming to him and begging for his help, and Jesus not only tells her no, but he insults her as well. I mean, there is no other way of looking at it, Jesus calls the woman a dog. And this is troubling to a lot of people. "Dog" was the name, the insult, the Slur, that the Jewish people often used for the Gentiles, so to hear it coming from the mouth of Jesus...well, that is

something that a lot of people have problems with. And so scholars and pastors throughout the years have tried all they can to explain and soften this passage.

One line of thought, is that Jesus was saying not what he believed, but what the Disciples were thinking. When he said, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” He was simply speaking the words that the disciples would have. In this way of looking at things, Jesus was trying to teach the disciples to let go of their own prejudices. Jesus was trying to turn this into a teaching moment for the disciples. In this way of thinking, Jesus knows how it is going to turn out, knows that he is going to heal the child anyway, and is just taking the opportunity to teach the disciples a lesson on inclusion. One article I read even went so far as to say that Jesus said one thing, but that his expression said something else, that there was a twinkle in his eye that invited the Syrophenician woman to verbally spar with him, to help him show the disciples the error of their ways. But you know, I just don't buy it. In the Gospels, when Jesus is trying to make a point to the disciples, he usually just turns to them and spells it out for them. And neither Matthew, nor Mark mention anything about an eye twinkle.

So, another way of looking at this is that Jesus was joking around with the woman. Some say that the word, dog, "might" be a mistranslation. Some say that

what he was really calling her was a "Little dog"; like a house pet that you keep and take care of. They say that because she was complaining so loudly trying to get his help, Jesus jokingly likened her to a yapping dog needing attention. They say that the teaching moment here wasn't for the disciples, but for the woman.

That she needed to realize that while the gentiles were included in the house of the Lord, Jesus primary mission was to the Jews. They were his main evangelical focus, and the gentiles were second, but still included. In this way of looking at the story, Jesus isn't meaning it as an insult at all, but as an affirmation that the Gentiles are included. These scholars would then say that the woman's comment that "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs," is not an argument with Jesus but a completion of what Jesus is saying. That when Jesus says "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter," Jesus is acknowledging that she understands his point, and the teaching moment is over.

I know that this line of reasoning is meant to make Jesus seem better, and I am usually the first one to say that Jesus was making a joke, because I do think Jesus had a sense of humor, but here, I can't see it. This version makes Jesus seem cold to me, almost calculating and uncaring. I mean, you can dress it up however you want, but calling a woman a dog, regardless of the size, just doesn't seem like a good way to teach.

So, if the teaching moment wasn't for the disciples and it wasn't for the woman, who are we left with? And the answer I have come to, as uncomfortable as it may seem, is Jesus. And that does make us uncomfortable, doesn't it? Because as much as we talk about the humanity of Jesus, we don't really expect him to be anything less than perfect all the time, do we?

But look at today's reading. Jesus and his disciples have headed out well away from the Jewish communities, Jesus and his followers were deep in Gentile territory, and they go to a house where they don't want anyone to know they were there. I mean Jesus was on vacation! It was his day off! They had gone where, hopefully, no one would recognize them and they had made sure not to spread it around that they were there. And yet, this woman, this Gentile woman, finds out that he is there and barges in. She is making a scene and being loud and Jesus, well, Jesus shuts her down.

Like anyone who has gotten that annoying call from work while trying to enjoy their time off, Jesus cuts her short. "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Maybe Jesus meant it as the insult it was, maybe it was just a poor choice of metaphor that he didn't think all the way through before he said it. Either way, this idea makes us uncomfortable, doesn't it. I mean, we want Jesus to be human and divine, but not

This human! This is too much like something we would do, and we expect more from Jesus.

But should we? I mean, Jesus drove the moneychangers from the temple with a whip. He cursed a fig tree because he was hungry and it was the wrong season for figs. And he frequently insulted the Pharisees and Sadducees. So why does this expression of humanity bother us? Is it because we ourselves are Gentiles? Tom Breidenthal, dean of religious studies at Princeton, thinks so. He said in one of his sermons, “I suspect we would not be so bothered by Jesus’ **unkind** words to the Syrophenician woman if they were not directed against the Gentile community. Those of us who are Gentile Christians have less trouble with Jesus’ invectives when they are directed against the Jewish leadership of his day”

Or is what really bothers us not Jesus comment at all, but rather what comes next? Because you see, after Jesus delivers this statement, after Jesus essentially tells the woman to go away, this woman...this Gentile Woman does what no one else in the Gospels ever does. She beats Jesus at his own game.

Jesus is the master of the debate. He has a black belt in verbal sparring, and every time someone tries to trip him up with a question, or tries to pin him down with an argument, Jesus turns the tables on them. Jesus, time and time again, makes those who argue with him or question him look foolish and/or see the error

of their ways. So how is it that this gentile woman from the middle of nowhere can turn the tables on him, and win?

At this point, I think we must be honest and say that the idea that Jesus was ever in any way bested simply cannot be accepted by many Christians. You see the problem, don't you? Such a possibility detracts too much from Jesus' divinity, his ability to know all and do all. But I think that is just what happened! I think that the teaching moment here was indeed for Jesus. I think, perhaps, that this moment, that this woman, made Jesus realize that it was time to expand his ministry, and his teachings.

As I said before, this encounter also appears in the book of Matthew, and before this takes place, when Jesus sends the disciples out to teach the people, he tells them to avoid the land of the Samaritans and don't go to the Gentiles, but only to the people of Israel. Compare this to the comments he makes after this encounter with the Syrophenician woman, especially those in his final command to his followers that they go out and make disciples of ALL the nations!

To me, today's reading seems to be a turning point in the ministry, seems to have been a teachable moment for Jesus, a time when he had his worldview widened by the comment of this unnamed, remarkable woman. And rather than finding this troubling, I find this exhilarating. For me, the good news of this story

is not that the child was healed, but that despite all the bias, despite all the history between Jews and Gentiles and God and the Jewish people, Jesus refused to be bound by the perceptions and preconceived notions of the world, and crossed the boundaries to make God's love and forgiveness available to all the people of the world! The kingdom of God was no longer just available to the chosen few, but open to all the nations of the world.

But I think even beyond this message of Good News and Hope is a challenge. For if even Jesus can experience a teachable moment, if even Jesus can have his world view altered, then how much more do we need to push our own assumptions, and our own boundaries?

Next week is Kick-off Sunday. A time when we will celebrate the beginning of a new year of programs and activities for the whole church. And while for many, that means Children's Sunday School, I am going to ask you to rethink your boundaries.

Jesus said, "Let the children be fed first," and I am going to ask you to think about that in regards to our Sunday Morning schedule. From the standpoint of Christian Education, "Let the children be fed first" seems to be saying for the majority of this church, let the kids go to Sunday School, and let the adults catch

their education later. Maybe I'll do a Bible study or join a circle later, when I have more free time. Let the children be fed first, and I'll eat when I get the chance...

Or when it comes to Sunday morning worship, it is just the reverse. Here the phrase, "Let the children be fed first" refers to the adults of the congregation, and all too often, the thought seems to be that the children can come to worship later...when they are older. But right now, it is not for them.

We need to expand our boundaries! As Jesus did when he healed the child, we need to overcome our traditions and preconceived notions of what Sunday mornings are like. If we never expect our children and youth to attend worship, then I say to you that what we are teaching them is that Worshiping God in community with others is something that only old people do! And if we reinforce that lesson, week after week, year after year, then in twenty years, we will have a generation of adults who feel that attending worship is unimportant, and something that other people do, not them.

Likewise, if all we do is attend worship and never participate in any form of discipleship, of learning, then while we may find ourselves filled with the love of Christ each week, how many teaching moments are we missing? How many growth opportunities are we missing out on, where we could expand our knowledge and our faith and grow closer to God?

The good news of this Gospel is that we are all included in the household of the Lord, and that even the smallest Crumb from the table is enough to fill our souls and sustain our faith. But Christ's table is there, it is set with the bread and the cup and it is open to all. Why should we limit ourselves to the crumbs, when we are offered so much more?

Amen.