

Evaluating Boundaries

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

As I read the text for today I have to admit that I struggled. This isn't an easy text to preach on. There are a variety of ways that one could get around certain issues, but I remember one of my professors in seminary saying that it is good to come to terms with the road block in the text.

In our text for this morning, we see Jesus in a very different light than what we are used to or expect. First, he tells the disciples that what comes out of one's mouth is what defiles a person, not what they eat or if they don't wash their hands. This is a continuation of the previous verses in which the Pharisees and the scribes were questioning Jesus about traditions of the elders. The Pharisees and scribes held to certain traditions that made an individual clean or unclean by their actions.

Secondly, and probably the most appalling thing that Jesus does in today's reading is that he ignored the woman asking for mercy. He followed it up with a comment to the disciples that he was only sent to save Israel, not Gentiles. Finally, the woman, most likely with every ounce of energy that she had went and knelt before Jesus and asked for help, to which he replied that it's not fair to take children's food and give it to the dogs.

Now, I don't know about you, but if it were me and I was treated this way I would probably give up or lose my temper and start yelling at Jesus. However, the woman, full of wit made her case that the dogs eat the crumbs from the master's table even though the meal wasn't intended for them. And then, all of a sudden, Jesus heals the woman's daughter and tells her that her faith is great.

As I thought and prayed about this text, I struggled with Jesus' words. It is almost as if the very thing he told the disciples of what defiles a person – he turned around

and did that in his interaction with the Canaanite woman. Especially his harsh words being that he didn't come to save her, only the lost sheep of Israel.

I think at this point it's fair to ask the question, did the woman's actions change Jesus' mind? After all, he was ignoring her and it seemed that he had no intention of helping her until she knelt down before him.

In college I had a class on the Philosophy of Religion. For the bulk of the semester we talked about the characteristics of an immanent God and the characteristics of a transcendent God. I couldn't help think of these characteristics when reflecting on Jesus' actions.

Some of the characteristics of a transcendent God are that God is: all-powerful, omniscient, omnipresent, not subject to change, and not subject to emotion.

On the flip side of this, the characteristics of an immanent God are they are subject to change and emotion. They are temporal – they can only be in one place at one time. They also do not know what an individual is going to do next. The Ancient Greek gods Zeus and Athena would be examples of immanent gods. They could change their mind and meddle in human beings lives...

The interesting thing for us to wrestle with is the fact that we tend to think of Jesus as both fully human and fully divine. In many ways, because of this dynamic, it seems that Jesus has tendencies of both an immanent and transcendent God.

I think the answer to the question that I asked earlier, did the woman change Jesus' mind about his mission is yes. Her actions and persistence helped him to see beyond his initial thought of his ministry.

If we think for a moment, Jesus had many, many crowds following him. I can only imagine that this was a mixed group of people of both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus' actions gave many people hope, not just a select group.

I think it is important to note that the interaction between the woman and Jesus follows a discussion on traditions of the elders of Israel. The Canaanite woman made new boundaries, just as Jesus was trying to do.

Karoline Lewis writes in her Living by the Word article in the Christian Century that, "she is the model of what it looks like when what is in the heart and what comes out of the mouth correlate. She is herself, according to all intents and purposes, in a constant state of defilement and impurity according to the standards set by her location, by the official representatives from Jerusalem and even by Jesus. ...Her persistence, therefore, is not only representative of what comes from her heart or her faith; it suggests her own questioning and thinking of traditional boundaries, ideas, and rituals. We might even wonder if Jesus' response is not

only to her demonstrative faith, but also her willingness to challenge tradition as he has done.”

Jesus and the Canaanite woman challenged traditions and changed people. What does this mean for us?

As we grow as a church may need to think critically and evaluate boundaries, ideas, and rituals so that we can share the gospel with other people. It may be that our minds need to change from our understanding of our discipleship journey to what God has in mind for us.

Lewis ends her article with these thought provoking words, “Jesus calls us to a similar kind of discipleship, a discipleship that exposes the boundaries set in place by others and the boundaries we place on ourselves. He calls us to a discipleship that is willing to go past these boundaries and journey into Tyre and Sidon, where Jesus promises to be to the end of the age.”

Let us pray. Lord God, you call each of us into your service. As disciples, be with us and guide us as we are challenged in different ways. Help us to be open and see things in a different way as Jesus did when the Canaanite woman gave her testament of faith. All these things we ask in Christ's name. Amen.