

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

September 8, 2024

Ethnicity, Gender, or Class?

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is something of a standard interpretation of this text present in most mainline protestant traditions. This standard interpretation typically highlights the ethnic and gender barriers at work in this interaction between Jesus and this unnamed, foreign woman. I have certainly preached sermons based on that standard interpretation in the past. And don't get me wrong, that interpretation, and those sermons (I think) were fine. But I recently encountered a different interpretation of this text that addresses some of the problems lurking behind the standard one.

The standard interpretation is summed well by John Chrysostom, an early church father and the Bishop of Constantinople from the 4th century CE. In his commentary on this text, he notes that, "Tyre and Sidon were places of the Canaanites, therefore the Lord comes to them, not as to His own, but as to men, who had nothing in common with the fathers to whom the promise was made."¹ So it goes like this: Jesus goes to the land of the traditional enemies of Israel, the Canaanites, and encounters a woman there. The woman begs for help, but Jesus understands his mission as being to the people of Israel and offers an analogy that can be interpreted as offensive. The woman quickly counters with an argument for grace that seemingly changes Jesus' mind. I have certainly preached this in the past as an expansion of the Kingdom of Heaven to include ever more people.²

The problem with that sermon has always been that this whole interaction seems inconsistent with Jesus' words and actions elsewhere in the Gospels. There are plenty of examples we can point to of Jesus acting far more graciously to foreigners and women. John 4 springs quickly to mind, Jesus willingly initiates a conversation with a Samaritan woman that involves him offering her the "water of life." Jesus doesn't need his mind changed here. Neither does he need it changed when the woman with

¹ Pseudo-Chrys., Vict. Ant. e Cat. in Marc.

² cf my sermon on [August 20, 2023](#)

the “issue of blood” touched his cloak³; nor when the foreign Gerasene demoniac throws himself at his feet.⁴

So why on earth does Jesus have to change his mind before helping this particular foreign woman? I never really had an answer to that, largely glossing over that point in my previous sermons. But in “Discourses of Empire,” Hans Leander offers an insight that can provide us with an interpretation more consistent with Jesus elsewhere. He explains that the woman represents the city-dweller more than foreigner, this is indicated first by the designation as “Gentile” in verse 24, which is specifically “Hellenis” (Ἑλληνίς), which in combination with the phrase, “Syrophenician by race” (Συροφοινίκισσα τῷ γένει) implies that the woman was *hellenized*, and “Those who were hellenized were usually the more affluent city dwellers.”

He goes into more detail on this point,

“A further indication to the woman’s socially elevated urban identity is the term Mark uses for the bed on which the daughter was lying (7:30). Rather than κράβατος, which designated the simpler mat or pallet on the floor (2:4–12; 6:55), the daughter was lying on a κλίνη, which implies a construction with legs. That the woman had a “real bed” at home therefore points to a more affluent status. She would thus have been seen as occupying a dominant position relative to Jesus, who in Mark is located in the countryside.”⁵

This woman likely represents a class of society with resources and interests that Jesus and his rural disciples simply have no access to. We stress about Jesus’ analogy, thinking he’s punching down because she’s a woman. But her position in society, likely higher than Jesus’ as an itinerant preacher, complicates this whole interaction. Rather than punching down, is Jesus prodding upwards? Is his analogy more about the ravenous nature of the wealthy as opposed to gatekeeping access to his grace? Is this an invitation to de-prioritize wealth and status...an invitation to humility?

I must admit, this nuance appeals to me a great deal. If for no other reason than it is far more consistent with the teachings of Christ elsewhere about wealth. Again and again in the Gospels Jesus warns his followers about greed and wealth: teaching that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter

³ Mark 5:27 (NRSVUE)

⁴ Mark 5:2 & Luke 8:27

⁵ Leander, H. (2013). *Discourses of Empire: The Gospel of Mark from a Postcolonial Perspective*. https://gupea.ub.gu.se/bitstream/2077/26886/2/gupea_2077_26886_2.pdf

heaven,⁶ that God will fill the hungry and send the rich away empty,⁷ and even causing a rich man to leave his presence weeping when Jesus invites him to give up his great wealth for the sake of others.⁸

With that in mind, along with the clues we're given in the Greek, we can read Christ's analogy in our text today in a totally different light. Perhaps this: "He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'" Is more a concern that once given an inch she "might take a mile" as the saying goes. With that interpretation her response becomes even more powerful. If this interaction is more about class than gender or ethnicity, this (likely) wealthy woman is saying, essentially, I'll take whatever I can get, even crumbs. This then becomes a testament to her willingness to do whatever it takes to see her daughter freed. She seems willing to give up everything to trust in the grace of God shown in Jesus Christ. She will even humble herself, *de facto* acknowledging that her wealth and status mean nothing in the face of her daughter's plight. For her daughter's sake she seems willing to do what that weeping rich man in Mark cannot: give up everything.

Not only does this interpretation seems more consistent with the teachings regarding wealth elsewhere in the Gospels, but it also illustrates Christ as shepherd. Given his teachings about community, I wonder if this warning is also a means of protecting his community of followers, his flock. Again and again when Jesus heals and exorcises demons it leads to people joining his community. Is he setting expectations for this woman should she begin following him? Sort of a particular warning for this wealthy potential disciple: you can join us, but taking what is meant for others is unacceptable and consuming ravenously is not what the Christ community is about. For the rich and powerful to enter the kingdom they must humble themselves, giving up their wealth and power. After all, "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."⁹

We can even see this playing out in our appointed reading from the Epistle of James. The tone of that letter makes it clear that the community has been wrong to show favoritism to the rich in their group. The living faith of Christ will move members of the Christ community to supply for the "bodily needs" of our neighbors.¹⁰ Those with much are encouraged to humble themselves and serve the needs of those with little.

⁶ Matthew 19:16-24

⁷ Luke 1:53

⁸ Mark 10:17-22

⁹ Matthew 6:24

¹⁰ James 2:16

Then there's our Psalm for today! It speaks of the justice of God: a justice that feeds the hungry, frees the captive, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up the lowly, cares for the stranger and sustains the orphan and widow.

Sure, the standard interpretation still works. It is important that Jesus crosses the boundaries of ethnicity and gender in this text. Reading this interaction as Christ changing his mind, being less of a gatekeeper and expanding the Gospel mission, can certainly teach us about who we are called to include. But if we go deeper, we discover even more nuance, an even deeper teaching about the nature of God's Kingdom.

God's Kingdom is a place where there is more than enough for all. God's Kingdom is a place where the needs of all are met. God's Kingdom has no place for ravenous overconsumption or manufactured scarcity. God's Kingdom requires humility and trust in God alone. God's Kingdom has no interest in favoritism or partiality. How different God's Kingdom looks from our kingdoms... And so, we pray "your kingdom come, your will be done." Your Kingdom of mutual care and aid come now, O God! Your will for equality and justice be done in and through us, O God! Amen.