

WHO ARE YOU CALLING A DOG?

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The story of the Canaanite woman

As a storyteller, when I begin to work on a passage like today's I must place myself in the role of each and every person in the story. I must hear in my ear a tone of voice an inflection and underlying all of that a meaning. This depiction of the meeting with the Canaanite woman required much careful thought and prayer to answer this question. I have to consider what might have been going on in Jesus' mind, the mind of the women and the disciples during this confrontation and I use the word confrontation purposefully.

This is also a passage that has caused a great deal of dispute because there is an essential question about Jesus' nature tied up in this story. Was Jesus showing his full humanity in this story where the Canaanite woman catches him up short and causes him to change his mind? Or is Jesus both divinely and humanly perfect, sinless and he was setting everybody up because he knew what she would do.

Both are valid and say more about us than about Jesus. Theologians, no less than Rowan Williams, maintain a perfect Jesus both humanly and divinely is essential. He cannot make a mistake. He is the perfect man and has to be for some people's theology to work.

However I wonder, did he make a mistake? Did the woman point this out and change his mind? Was this a moment when he realized that there were others outside of the Jews that he was called to help. So far in Matthew he has only healed and worked within the Jewish world. Now with this scene Matthew has Jesus broaden the scope of this ministry. Think for a moment and listen to his words. Jesus refers to the Canaanite woman as a dog! That is pretty strong language from my point of view.

For me this passage shows that Jesus is truly human and did make a mistake and God used the Canaanite woman to get his attention. I am also absolutely sure that there are people in this congregation who will disagree with me and that is perfectly all right. My first rector on Cape Cod debated this point with me, for like others his theology his image of Jesus needed to be perfect. Yet we served together in ministry for three and a half years. It is ok to disagree.

As the Canaanite woman brings Jesus up short by saying even the dogs get to eat the crumbs from under the table, I am prompted to wonder who have we turned our back on because they are not one of us? Who is not worthy to gather the crumbs from under our table because they belong to that category we call

other? The cries, "We need to take care of our own first," smack up against the words of the Canaanite woman in my mind and in my heart.

For me, when I listen to news about what is happening on our southern border my mind goes to my answer to the question I just posed. Now let me repeat this is my answer, my reflection, this is not the gospel according to Mark but I want to present this to you so you may understand the passion behind a particular stand that I take in regards to the children crossing from Central America. I am happy to talk with any of you during coffee hour or at any time if you have questions or want to flat our disagree with me, please this is an open invitation to conversation. Disagreeing is ok on this issue, just as there are two ways to view Jesus in today's story there are multiple ways to look at this situation.

Let me tell you a story and I think you will understand where I am coming from with this. I have referred to a visit to the El Hogar orphanage in Tegucigalpa Honduras. I have used my time there to illustrate several important theological points but I have not told you much about this place. Today is the day to tell you, because for me it helps answer the question of who the Samaritan woman is for me.

I traveled to the orphanage with people from St. David's in Ashburn Virginia. There are two facilities one for boys ages pre-K through about 7th or 8th grade. There is a vocational technical school for older boys that train them to be carpenters, metal workers, electricians and there is also the agricultural school. This cross I have with me today was made by one of the boys and the sell them to earn money for the orphanage. Those who have been in my office know that it hangs directly over the little prayer altar that I have in my office.

The reason we traveled there was to help build a new school for the technical trades on the estate of a retired physician who had donated his home and the land to the orphanage. We were charged with building the shower and bath house for the older boys. They were moving the school because even in 2004 the city was too dangerous, the gangs to prevalent for the boys to be safe and moving out of the city was the only option to keep the boys from falling prey to the gangs and criminal element.

I want to focus however on the younger boys and their facilities because that is where our mission team stayed. The boys here are in an orphanage, but not all of them are truly orphans. Some have been removed from their family because dad may be dead, or missing and mom cannot or will not care for them. Many have mothers who work in the drug and prostitution world and have been removed by the authorities. So El Hogar is now the only home they know and sadly these are the lucky ones because they have a chance.

The boys live in the heart of the city. They have several dormitories where they sleep in bunk beds 12 or so to a room. They have a school building and a large

room where they eat three meals a day. By the way the dumpsters where leftover food is disposed is locked because many of these boys have been so food insecure that they will eat what they are given at the meal and then go dumpster diving because they can't quite believe that they will in fact get another meal later that day.

There are 10 foot tall concrete block walls around the orphanage with a steel gate that is padlocked from inside at dusk every evening. On top of the walls are bits of broken bottles and glass imbedded in concrete and that is topped with barbed wire. This is how all the homes of middle and upper class families are also protected even though many are inside of a gated community with guards at the gate armed with automatic weapons. We were told under no circumstances were we to go outside the gate after sunset. Every night as we slept in the guest quarters we heard gunshots from the neighborhood outside the walls.

Yet inside these walls the boys are safe, fed and educated. We would leave by van to go about an hour outside of town and work on the new upper school and return to the younger boys school for dinner, which was usually just beans and rice. They did get meat at lunch but meat was a luxury and only appeared once a day at most. After dinner came the time I loved. During the evening free time the boys would play soccer or basketball and many would come and find one of us. They would have a book in their hand that they wanted to read to us. I had three little ones who read me *Clifford, el gran perro colorado* Clifford the Big Red Dog almost every night.

As I sat there each evening with one of those boys in my lap reading in Spanish my heart was both filled with joy and with great sadness. Joy at the privilege of caring for one of God's little ones and sadness knowing how many boys just like them live outside the safe walls of the orphanage.

So when I see the news, my heart goes back to three little boys gathered around me in an orphanage in Honduras and my heart breaks, because I know why and what they have fled. I've been there and seen it. For me those boys are the children of the Canaanite woman. For me those boys are the ones who deserve at least the crumbs from under our table.

It is personal, but this is where the Canaanite woman speaks to me. When I see the news I wonder if one of those boys is in one of the detention cells for they are now 16 or 17. When I see the news I am back in the orphanage with a first grader on my lap reading *Clifford, el gran perro Colorado* and my heart breaks.