
How Did I Not See That?

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Proper 15 – Year**

[unedited transcript:]

Wait, did I just hear Jesus say dogs? Did Jesus just say it's not good to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs? Did Jesus just call the Canaanite woman a dog? I mean, did you hear that? Did your eyebrows raise, did you get a twitch in your stomach? Did you just want to move on so you didn't have to think about that part of it? I know I did. And people looking at this passage for centuries have. It's uncomfortable to think about Jesus uttering what amounts to a racial slur. So we have many explanations that make us feel better. The word translated as dogs is better translated as puppies. Jesus was being playful. Or Jesus was simply testing the woman's faith. He didn't mean anything by it. He was just giving her something to push against, so she could see how powerful she really was.

Or sometimes we go all the way and we say, "Yeah, he was just angry. I mean, he was having a bad day. He's only human after all." But what if we take another approach? What if we think about Jesus actually saying something like that. Because you see, we all have worldviews, or frames through which we look at the world. We start to get them from our parents at birth. We learn about them from our culture. We study them in school. They become such an embodied part of us that we don't even know we have them. These assumptions about how things work, and who people are, and what we should be afraid of. They're so much a part of us that we don't even question them. We don't realize we're interpreting what we see. We think that's just the way the world is. It's a very powerful thing, this worldview.

Brené Brown, who many of you know as a writer about shame and vulnerability, tells a hilarious story. She was teaching at the time, racism and feminist theory. And she got on a plane to go to a conference, where she was going to give a presentation about feminism. As she sat on the plane, the copilot walked out of the cockpit, and it was a woman. Brené said, "Yes, it's a woman. This is great. Yes." She sat there for a minute longer, and the captain walked out of the cockpit. And the captain was a woman too. Brené said that without even thinking, she said, "Wait a minute, what's going on here? Why are we having a female inventure? Is this some kind of training? Where are the real pilots? I need a real pilot. This plane is going to crash." And then she caught herself.

The worldview of pilots needing to be men, of only men being in control, providing safety, was operating inside of Brené Brown. Despite her learning, despite her teaching a feminist theory, despite her being full on, as she says, it was lurking there, and it made its appearance. But Brené Brown stayed with it for just a moment, and realized what was going on.

What if that's what Jesus did too? Salvation worldview, if you will, of the Jews in the time of Jesus was very clear. Jews first, Gentiles later. Isaiah, of course, says the Jews are to be the light of the nations, nations meaning Gentiles. Jews first, Gentiles later. Ezra and Nehemiah, while espousing a somewhat modified version of this universalism, are careful to point out the dangers of intermarriage, and other things that may threaten the purity of the race. Jews first, Gentiles later. Even in Zachariah, there's this wonderful word picture of 10 men of every tongue on earth, coming and holding onto the robes of a Jew. So that as the Jew ascends to God, they too will ascend. Jews first, Gentiles later.

So what if it was this worldview, these assumptions that Jesus made without even realizing he was making them, that caused him to say what many others had said before. This Canaanite woman is a dog. Somebody

he doesn't need to be concerned about, somebody he doesn't need to focus on, somebody he can dismiss with impunity. What if that just came out of him as it has come out of everybody around him? He didn't think about it. He didn't make any assumptions. He was actually giving her some respect, just by addressing her at all. What if it was about the worldview that he had, the assumptions that he had made? It's interesting, of course, because she doesn't just go away, nor does she respond in kind.

She offers what's sometimes called a non-complimentary response. That doesn't mean she dissed him. He gave her this racial slur, and you might have expected her to respond in kind, but she doesn't. She responds in a non-complimentary way. In fact, she over accepts his response. She says, "Yes, but even the dogs get the crumbs off the master's table. I'm not going anywhere. And I'm willing to sacrifice myself to this encounter for my child. But as I do it, I'm letting you know that I'm real, I'm letting you know that I'm a human. I'm exposing my vulnerability, but also my strength." And it is to this, I think that Jesus responds. It is to her humanity that Jesus engages. It is her dignity that he respects, and in doing, so suddenly is forced to challenge the assumptions of his worldview. The assumption that she was a dog. Not so, was it? She was strong and courageous, and persistent, and maybe even more important than all of that, she loved her daughter, and was willing to do what she needed to do in order to save her. In order to heal her. This was no dog.

This was a human, a human who would not be denied. And it is that spirit of sacrifice and recognition, of God's power that we say... When we say the [inaudible 00:07:35] prayer in our Rite One Eucharistic prayer, The Prayer of Humble Access, I bet even if you haven't read it in a while, you will recognize these words.

We do not presume to come to this thy table, oh merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table. We, in that moment of receiving back the body and blood of Christ, place ourselves just below the Syrophenician woman. It's an interesting prayer when you think about it that way.

Well, that's what real love will do for you. It will cause you to challenge your assumptions, and draw the circle wider when thinking about who it is who's worthy of your respect and dignity. So what are we to take from all of this? How might this affect our lives as we go forward? I think it's worth saying that we all have a worldview. We all have a framework, and all of our interpretations and perceptions and emotions and language come out of this worldview, out of this framework. And yet their assumptions in there, and it's up to us to challenge them. The first step I think is to notice when you feel challenged, when you feel defensive, when your anger and frustration seems provoked by whatever challenge someone is offered in a disproportionate way, mind you. Being self-aware enough to know when you're responding in a way that tells you something about yourself, and then resist, resist, resist the temptation to make it all go away, to explain it away. To forget about it, to move on past it, because you have the power to do so.

Now follow Jesus' example, stand there with that tension, with that feeling, and ask the question, what is this about, and who is it that is in front of me? Who is it who is challenging me? Is there an encounter there waiting for me? Because often you'll find God's presence there. We don't always see the racial frameworks that we carry around. We don't always see the economic frameworks that we carry around, but in failing to see them, we act into things that aren't us sometimes. And so we are in an era right now where we're all learning that, and we're all learning how to learn, right. We're learning how to learn. And yet Jesus' example stands for us. Know when it's happening, sense your own defensiveness, don't run away. Don't explain it away. Don't walk through it, stand there. And look around. Who is it who's issuing you an invitation for engagement?

I want you to hear a story that Bryan Stevenson tells. It's a powerful story and I think it makes just this point, Bryan Stevenson, as you know, set up a museum, a legacy museum in Montgomery, Alabama, and part of the exhibit are a number of glass jars filled with earth. They have plotted or mapped where a number of lynchings took place in the South, and for each lynching, they have written out an explanatory memo and given directions to people. They will then give them a jar, and invite them to go to that place and fill that jar with the earth that is there, the earth that contains the memory of the individual who was victimized, and then to bring it back where it sits on a shelf. And this shelf is truly a thing of beauty, with all of the different colors of earth that have been collected. Stevenson says that one day, this middle-aged black woman who came to get a jar and go to a particular site. Her daughter was going to come with her, but at the last minute was unable to, so she was there alone.

She was afraid. She was anxious, but she was convinced that she should do this. Her persistence was there. So she got her jar and she got her map, and she got her little digging tool. And she drove out down a dirt road in middle Alabama to a very isolated place marked on the map. She got out, she put down the glass and the implements, she got down on her knees and she began to dig. She was afraid, but she began to dig. As she began to dig, a pickup truck started down the road. As it passed by her, a very large white man looked out of

the window right at her. And her fear began to swell up in her throat. The pickup truck went down the road and she could hear it turn around. And it came back. She began to dig even more furiously, just too afraid to even think about what might happen.

And as the pickup truck went by this time, it went by slowly. And he again looked at her very directly. He went up the road a bit, he turned around and he came back, parked his truck, got out, and started to walk toward her. She remembered then that they had told her at the museum that you don't have to tell anybody why you're there. Just tell them you're gathering soil for your garden. It's okay. And she had decided she would do just that. She would tell this man if he asked, she was gathering soil for the garden.

As he approached her, he stood there and he said, "What are you doing?" And she said, without thinking, "I'm digging dirt for the museum in honor of a black man who was lynched right here in 1939." The man stood there for a minute, looked at the memorandum that she had next to her and said, "Does that tell you about the lynching?" She said it does. And he asked, "Could I read it?" And she said, "Yes." So she handed it to him, and he read it for a minute. She went back to digging, not knowing what to think of this encounter. And then after a minute he said, "Could I help you?"

And she said, "Yes." He got down on his knees, and by her telling he began to thrust his hand into the soil, grabbing the dirt and putting it in the jar, and thrusting his hands back into the soil, working feverously. She began to dig again too, and as the jar began to fill, he stopped. And as she looked over at him, she realized that he was shaking. His shoulders were literally shaking. And then tears began to come down his face. And then she began to cry. And he said, "I'm sorry, I've upset you." And she said, "No, you have blessed me."

And then he said, "I'm just so afraid that my grandfather was one of the men who lynched this man." They fill the jar, screwed on the cap. He asked if he could take her picture with the jar. She asked if she could take his picture with the jar. They went back to the museum together and put the jar on the shelf with the other jars. We all have a worldview. We act out of that with such confidence that we don't even know we're doing it. Yet there are things that challenge us.

We'll feel them, we'll sense them by our defensiveness, and our fear and our anger. But sometimes, if we can learn just to stand there in that moment, to look around and see who it is that's inviting us into an encounter, we will experience the presence of God. We will draw the circle wider. And we will question the assumptions that have left us in a smaller world than we really want to live in. And that encounter, that change, that disorder which brings order, will be a blessing. Not only for us, but for who we have encountered, because together we will have gotten out of the way, and created space for the presence of God. Amen.