

And just like that, I've added Milk Bones to my shopping cart.

Let me preface this by saying: I'm a cat person... but I married a dog person. And for most of our marriage, Keith and I had a dog, a rescue dog, a dog who was a mix of who-knows-what but looked just like a dingo, a dog named Malabu... and though I'm a cat person, I loved her. She died not long before I came here to Wesley, and lately Keith's been pining to rescue another dog. So on Tuesday, Charlie came into our lives... and with him, a big box of Milk Bones.

Funny how things work out, isn't it? This week, our family adopted a new dog... and this week, our brown bag item -- our inspiration for worship -- is a box of Milk Bones dog treats (courtesy of Zel Shifter). Throughout the season of Easter and now into the season of Pentecost, we've been drawing inspiration from ordinary items, "brown bag" items, provided by many of you. We've been finding glimpses of the gospel in things like a trivet, an outlet cover, a box of band-aids, a hamburger patty press, a toilet bowl gasket, a fidget spinner, a turkey frill, and a packet of ketchup. Incredible, isn't it? How God can be found in the most ordinary of things?

This week's inspiration is the item that I'm suddenly finding in my shopping cart: a box of Milk Bones dog treats. And I have to tell you, church... sometimes, it's a bit of a challenge to figure out which scripture passage to pair with a given brown bag item. This time, it wasn't a challenge. What scripture passage goes with a box of Milk Bones? Easy. The one where Jesus talks about dog food.

Hear again this reading from the Gospel of Matthew:

[Matthew 15:21-28, NRSV]

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house

of Israel.”²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.”²⁶ He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Just choose that scripture where Jesus talks about dog food. Simple enough, right?

Wrong. This story isn’t simple. This story is as complicated as it gets. And why? Because... because in this story, Jesus isn’t really acting like Jesus. Right when you think you’ve got this whole Bible thing figured out, and you know how it works, and you know how Jesus works... you come across this Bible story where Jesus is frankly being kind of rude.

And you know, it’s not necessarily the only moment in the gospels when we encounter a Savior who wakes up on the wrong side of the cosmos. For example, there’s this story in the Gospel of John where Jesus gets a little mouthy with his mom at this wedding in Cana... but on the whole, Jesus is usually the good guy in the Bible stories. The one who’s doing the right things. The one who’s always kind and compassionate and gracious. The one we want to emulate. *I want to be like Jesus.*

But then we have this story. This story where a woman comes up to Jesus, pleading with him to save her daughter. This story where Jesus just... ignores her, and the disciples reject her, and Jesus (in a roundabout way) calls her a dog. “But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs’” (Matthew 15:25-26, NRSV).

Seriously, Jesus? I don’t want this kind of story in the Bible. I want the kind of story where the disciples, say, are the ones who say something hateful like that, and then Jesus is the one who rebukes them, and then we’re the ones who get to side with Jesus.

That's the kind of Bible story I want, the kind of Bible story that's clear and simple, the kind of Bible story where everything is as it should be. I don't want a Bible story where *Jesus* is the one lacking compassion, lacking grace, lacking (it would seem) some basic human civility. How am I supposed to preach this story? How am I supposed to *read* this story?

I'm not the only one asking those questions. Biblical commentators and religious scholars have struggled with this story, too. In fact, some of them have argued that Jesus is actually using the diminutive form of the Greek word for "dog," so he's really just calling her a "puppy"... so it's fine. Seriously?!? Church, sometimes we want so badly for the Bible to fit into a box, for *Jesus* to fit into a box, that we'll bend over backwards searching for ludicrous interpretations that will hold that box together.

So let's do something different. If we simultaneously hold that Jesus is good (which he is), and that he's not just calling this woman a cute puppy (which he's not)... then perhaps there's another way to read this story. Perhaps we can read this story with the same mind and heart and spirit and eyes and openness with which we read the parables. Perhaps we can read this strange story as a parable.

Sound like a stretch? I don't think so. In fact, I think the scripture itself invites it. And why do I think that? Because of the language used to identify the woman in the story. This is one of those stories that appears both in Matthew's gospel (where we read it today) and Mark's. In his earlier rendering of the story, the author of Mark describes this woman as a "Syrophoenecian" woman -- a term referring to a specific place, or to what we (in modern terms) might call race. But in this rendering of the story, the author of Matthew describes her as a "Canaanite" woman.

We've heard of the Canaanites before, in the stories of the earliest days of the Israelites. Canaanites were the sworn enemies of the Israelites. Israelites hated

Canaanites, and Canaanites hated Israelites, just because, just since always. They were a people set against each other from the beginning, the Hatfields and McCoys of the ancient biblical narrative. If anyone was “them” in the Bible’s “us vs. them,” it was the Canaanites.

Doesn’t bode well for the Canaanite woman in the story, does it? Thing is... by the first century, there was no such thing as a “Canaanite” anymore. There was no such place as “Canaan” anymore. For me, that’s the first clue, the first indication that I shouldn’t read this story literally. This isn’t a story about a woman from Canaan, or a woman identified with the Canaanite people. This is a story about someone who is an outsider, someone who is different, someone who is as “other” as “other” gets. This is a story about the “other.”

What’s more, this is a story about how we typically respond to those we see as “other.” That’s what we see in this story, right? We see responses. We see how the disciples respond to this woman, this “Canaanite woman,” and we see how Jesus responds to her, too. It’s not a good look. Jesus ignores her. The disciples reject her. Jesus insults her. Then, after some conversation, he praises her and heals her daughter... but let’s not overlook the responses that come before that. It’s not a good look. These are not good responses.

But again -- I don’t think this is merely a story about how Jesus and the disciples responded to a particular woman. Parable, right? I think this is a story about how we typically respond to the voices of those we see as “other.” Like any good parable, we can see ourselves in the story. Along these lines, commentator Marilyn Salmon writes:

Of course the story *is* about Jesus. We see a very human Jesus. We see ourselves mirrored in Jesus’ attitude toward the Canaanite woman, but not our best selves. We know very well the tendency to define and fear an “other” on the basis of skin color, nationality, class, or creed, deeply ingrained stereotypes that go back generations or even centuries. We

resent being bothered by the concerns of *those* people. ... And we are very good at justifying our actions rather than admitting the prejudice[s] that persist.¹

I think this is a story about how we typically respond to the voices of those we see as “other.” So with this story -- as with any good parable -- I have to embrace the challenge of seeing myself in the story: what I am, and what I might be.

There’s transformation in the story, for sure. Not for the disciples, of course. Their response to her voice is entirely static. No change. No transformation. *Send her away, Jesus! She’s not one of us, and she’s being annoying with her persistent pleas for help.* End of story -- their part in it, at least. End of their response.

But Jesus’ response to her voice is dynamic. He first ignores her (which doesn’t seem very Jesus-y)... and then insults her (which also doesn’t seem very Jesus-y)... but by the end, he affirms her (which feels much more Jesus-y). In Jesus’ response, we find something dynamic, something that looks more like a journey, something we might call transformation.

Of course, Jesus doesn’t really need transformation. He’s Jesus. But we’re reading this story as parable, right? That means we get to see ourselves in this story... and *that* means we get to see ourselves in the *transformation* of this story.

There’s transformation in the story, to be sure. And where does it begin? By listening when the “other” speaks. She speaks. This woman speaks. This “Canaanite” woman speaks. In scripture, women often don’t. The words of women go unrecorded. The words of Canaanite women go particularly unrecorded. But when she speaks (which is novel enough on its own), her words create the space in the story for transformation to take place. Transformation takes place because of the words of the

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=125

one who is deemed “other.” Transformation takes place because someone *listens* to the words of the one who is deemed “other.”

And church... we need that kind of transformation at the moment. See, I think this “parable” speaks to our polarized world... a world increasingly structured in terms of insiders and outsiders, “us” vs. “them.” I think this “parable” speaks to a world in which we’re inclined first to classify someone as “other” ... and then to overlook, ignore, reject, insult, or do damage to the “other.” What was it that the commentator said?

We see ourselves mirrored in Jesus’ attitude toward the Canaanite woman, but not our best selves. We know very well the tendency to define and fear an “other” on the basis of skin color, nationality, class, or creed, deeply ingrained stereotypes that go back generations or even centuries.²

If that’s who we are, and that’s our very tendency... then how can this “parable” help us to move from where we are to where God wants us to be? How can this “parable” help us open ourselves to transformation?

For starters... I think this story, this parable, compels us to take stock in our own attitudes. In what ways and under what circumstances are we (perhaps unconsciously) deeming someone else as the “other”? We do this in a lot of ways. Right now, as a nation, we’re particularly focused on how we do this in terms of race. And it doesn’t have to only be about race (we draw all kinds of dividing lines in all kinds of ways)... but for those of you who look like me, those of you whose skin looks like my skin, those of you who are white in the United States of America in 2020.... I would encourage you to think about this in terms of race. Don’t shy away from that. Don’t let your own discomfort with the idea of racism distract you from reflecting on racism. Face race. To be white in this country and never reflect on race or the sin of racism is, in itself, an act of complicity. So take stock, every one of you. Consider the ways you (perhaps

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=125

unconsciously) draw lines and construct categories of “me” and “the other.” If you can’t find any place within yourself where you’re doing this “othering” ... look again. You’re not looking hard enough.

Then, as you take stock of your own tendencies and biases, your own capacity to do all this “othering,” take it one step further. Ask yourself: *How does this impact how I respond to the voices of the “other”? How do I respond to their words, their pains and pleas, their experiences? Do I ignore them, perfectly content to keep things the way they are? Do I reject them, because they’re unfamiliar to me or inconvenient for me? Do I rationalize them or explain them away? Do I respond with insults or disdain? Do I try to define someone else’s experience for them, rather than allow them the space to define it for themselves? Or... am I willing to listen to the voices of the “other,” even when it’s deeply uncomfortable? Am I open to allowing that experiencing of “listening” to change my response, to change me?*

In this parable, this complicated dog-food parable, we find this reminder to listen to the voices and experiences of the so-called “other.” And that reminder couldn’t have come at a more opportune time. In this highly polarized world, the very act of listening is important work, needful work, profound work, holy work. What’s more, I think the act of humble, earnest listening may just be the raw material the Spirit needs to work a life-changing, justice-bringing transformation in each of us.