

We could fairly ask, how did we get from Isaiah's glorious vision of a world reconciled to God and each other, to that ugly exchange between Jesus and the Canaanite woman? If you ask most Christians what incident from Jesus's public ministry makes him look worst, or is the most upsetting, when they weren't thinking of any particular story, I think most would come up with the cleansing of the Temple, where he drove out the money-changers, but I find his encounter with this woman even harder to hear, or to read. Fortunately, we can also ask not only why he spoke to her so harshly, but also, how do we get from a difficult moment to the glorious reconciliation God intends for us?

I think the two questions are related. There seem to be two answers commonly proposed to the question of why Jesus spoke to her so harshly. The most common seems to be that he was merely testing the woman's faith, but that is inconsistent with the text and the context and, you know, everything else we know about Jesus. D. Mark Davis points out that Jesus "would gladly test the faith of a pompous, self-righteous, person of power and entitlement, but it seems strange that Jesus would do so to a desperate mother whose child is tormented. The words 'irony' or 'test' or 'feigning' etc. are not in the text unless we add them."*

The second common answer is that the text is exactly as unpleasant as it seems. Maybe Jesus was still frustrated from having to explain his parable to his disciples, as he shows when he asks, "Are you also still without understanding?" It's hard to imagine him saying that without some emotion. It would be very human to snap at someone after a moment like that, and people are allowed to have feelings and opinions that other people don't like.

And really, who would want to deal with this situation when they are already tired and frustrated after a long journey? Whenever someone comes out and starts shouting at you, you just know your day is going to get worse. The Greek word translated "shouting" is *krazo*. It "is onomatopoeia for a raven's cry... but it is intended to be more desperate than comical.... Matthew uses this term for blind men, demons, disciples in a boat during a storm, Peter sinking in the sea... crowds saying 'Hosanna,'... crowds calling for Jesus' death, and Jesus in his last breath."*

Matthew links this incident verbally with some of the most serious moments in his Gospel, and he also links it geographically with an Old Testament story. The same scholar, D. Mark Davis, points out that this story happens in the area where "Elijah boarded with a widow, whose vessels of meal and oil did not empty and whose son Elijah brought back to life. The food and healing of the Elijah story seem to be at play in this story."*

Which makes me believe there is a third answer to why Jesus spoke harshly to the Canaanite woman: he was up to something. Jesus's words to the woman, while out of character for him, may serve a higher purpose. Remember how after she approaches Jesus, the disciples intervene and tell him to send her away? "The disciples' demand,

'Send her away,' echoes what they said about the 5,000+ that were gathered in the wilderness with Jesus as it was getting late."*

Those feeding stories are ultimately stories of abundance and grace, not hoarding and testing. It's unlikely the woman had heard those stories, but in her own story, she ultimately experiences abundance and grace. In her story, rather than a literal feeding, food is a metaphor for a profound spiritual healing.

After the disciples needed help understanding his last parable, Jesus might well have identified a teachable moment for them. What if his difficult words to the woman were a straw man that he was confident she would strike down, in order to drive a point home to the disciples. Clearly Jesus knew that he would have to go to great lengths to get through to them; he knew them well enough to know that even after the Holy Spirit came upon them, they would struggle with the expansion of his mission to include gentiles. Giving them a dramatic story to remember would point them in the right direction.

In any case, the conversation ends with Jesus describing the Canaanite woman's faith as "great." Usually Jesus is criticizing people for having little faith, but he does praise the faith of the centurion whose boy he healed. The Canaanite woman and the centurion did not follow Jesus, or repent, or convert, but they did come to him from across the vast pagan-Jewish divide with astonishing confidence in his power to heal.

Healing can come out of division, confrontation, and conflict. In a sense, it always does. And this story reminds us that healing isn't necessarily pleasant. Even healings that have nothing to do with demons can be slow, painful, and messy. The fact that we pursue healing despite knowing this shows how important healing is to us, and Scripture shows how important healing is to God, too.

Scripture makes it clear that while Jesus's ministry was rooted in a specific place, time, culture, and ethnicity, the divine plan was always for that ministry of healing and reconciliation to reach the ends of the earth. This goes back to Genesis, and is articulated in visions like Isaiah's that we just heard, a vision of people of other nations in right relationship with God and reconciled with God and with each other.

Jesus's public ministry was indeed focused on the people of Israel, despite the endless needs of the world. Jesus healed all those who came to him in faith, but he could have done more. All of us could always do more. I suppose Jesus could have traveled to the ends of the earth, focused on healing, feeding, and peacemaking, until he died a natural death. Although people would just need more healing, feeding, and peacemaking after that. The fact that Jesus followed a different plan doesn't mean he didn't care, but we can understand the feeling that makes people criticize his choices.

Paul's question, "Has God rejected his people," may be rhetorical, but it is also emotionally relevant. No, God never rejects anyone, but we can certainly feel that way sometimes. Sometimes we become resentful when God doesn't give us what we want, when we want it, especially if we are certain of the righteousness of our request and

ourselves. Sometimes we reject God outright, or more subtly, we forget, we get distracted, we allow other things to take God's place.

John of the Cross wrote that when people are having some success in the development of their spiritual lives, God might make them feel as though God is distant from them, in order to teach us the value of seeking God out, and the value of staying faithful for its own sake, but even that is not a rejection because the goal is a closer union between the individual and God. We might feel like outcasts, but we never are, because God is always with us. Today's Gospel shows us that, and reminds us that the faithful always come to a good end.

So Jesus wasn't afraid to take time to sleep, eat and celebrate, time to rest and pray, and even took his disciples with him into the wilderness, basically, holding a retreat. That, too, was part of the plan made by a God who rested on the seventh day. We Christians are part of the plan, too. God blesses us with gifts for ministry, in order that we might all take our parts in God's glorious project of reconciliation and healing. By the grace of God, we all can get from difficult moments to the glorious reconciliation God intends for us.

*[https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/08/the-gospel-is-going-to-dogs.h
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