

Faith to fire back

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I struggle with the story of Jesus encountering the Canaanite woman. I don't know if it's the lack of compassion in Jesus' voice or the exploitation of power or the tone of condescension, but if this were the only story I knew of Jesus I'd be turned off.

What do we do with this text? With any text that we don't know how to preach? Or a text we just don't like? A seasoned pastor told me that she never preached on a text she didn't understand. On one level that makes a lot of sense: it keeps one from being trite or fake in the pulpit.

But on another level, how much do I understand *any* of the texts I preach on? Maybe wrestling through the ones I don't like is as important as preaching on the ones I think I understand. The hope is that even with difficult texts I'll see something about God that I need to know and share.

When the Canaanite woman calls to Jesus, he doesn't even acknowledge her. He doesn't give her the time of day. But the woman is persistent. Her daughter is suffering, and this Jesus can help. So she keeps calling out. The disciples urge Jesus to make her leave. He seems to agree and says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, I did not come for you, so get lost.

She kneels and says simply, "Lord, help me."

Jesus is unmoved. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Jesus calls the woman a dog! I have a hard time even reading it out loud. If I were this woman, I'd be so disappointed that I would leave and find myself a different messiah. One who cares. But the woman fires right back at Jesus. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table."

This time Jesus says, “Woman, great is your faith!” and grants her wish. Her daughter is healed.

Is the point to encourage great faith? Is it a lesson in a Rudy-esque spirit of perseverance? Is the point that Jesus has the power to heal us if we beg? This Jesus is no soft, warm, cuddly Messiah who is always there for everyone at all times. This text suggests that Jesus is not always nice, and was not always available to everyone.

Yet every time the woman addresses Jesus she calls him Lord. Three separate times. She understands who Jesus is: He is Lord. Period. Jesus does not have to fit our expectations for Jesus to be who he is. He is the Lord. Maybe that is the fundamental point.

Maybe this is why she was so persistent. She had faith in Jesus as the Lord. She allows Jesus the freedom to speak and act as the Lord. Maybe because of this she is not offended, like I am, when he calls her as a dog. Maybe she decides that before the Lord of the Universe we all are dogs, and that we are all dependent on free scraps from the table. She has the faith to fire back at Jesus. This is the kind of faith that seems to move Jesus to give a second look.