Dogging Jesus: Matthew 15:21-28

A kneeling woman does not have far to fall, and by all rights Jesus' insult should have floored her on the spot.

by Peter S. Hawkins in the August 9, 2005 issue

Christians throughout the ages have proclaimed that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb.13:8). The implicit teaching is that by being eternally the same, he is therefore divine: a Rock of Ages and, like the Father of Lights, beyond the shadow of changing. He is.

But what of his humanity, which he shares with us through the mystery of the incarnation? Tom DeLay has recently reminded us that Jesus of Nazareth began his life as an embryo; he also died a thirtysomething. Things happened in between. By virtue of his being flesh and blood—“of the substance of the Virgin Mary” and therefore mutable like us—he must have moved from one place to another: learned a language, taken a first step, developed as a human being, even changed his mind. Is it possible to be human and remain “the same”?

By and large, the Gospels sidestep the issue of what we might call Jesus’ psychological development; instead, they depict other kinds of variability that result from having a body and an emotional life. We see him grow tired of crowds, need to be alone, and fall asleep (with a cushion under his head, according to Mark 4:38). He grows hungry and eats; he cries out from the cross, “I thirst.” Not infrequently his emotions boil over in anger at Pharisees, money changers and even his own disciples. He also erupts into grief, both over the death of Lazarus at Bethany and for himself in the garden of Gethsemane.

There is one occasion, however, that stands out among these human moments—an occasion when we see him learn something new and, as a result, become someone different. As recorded by Mark as well as Matthew, Jesus is brought up short by an unexpected truth. Not only does he change his mind, but does so in a breathtaking

180-degree turn. Most astonishing of all, it is a pagan woman who makes him do it.

His encounter with her takes place outside Jewish Galilee, in the gentile region of Tyre and Sidon. Away from the safety of home, not to mention the purity laws that keep life clean and godly, he is vulnerable to trouble. Enter, as if on cue, “a Canaanite woman from that vicinity.” As a Canaanite she is the archetypal other, more beyond-the-pale even than the Samaritans we see Jesus deal with so graciously in the other Gospels. As a Canaanite *and* a woman, moreover, she is meant to be kept at least two arms’ distance from this pious Jewish man.

To add irritation to potential injury, the woman is a screamer. She dogs Jesus and his followers with her cries; she does not scruple to use Jewish flattery she has no right appropriating (“Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!”). Nor does she hesitate to put her worst foot forward in order to get a hearing: “My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.”

What do you do with a pushy Canaanite woman who won’t shut up? Jesus tries to ignore her; his disciples urge him to send her away; and when the itinerant rabbi finally speaks his mind—in response to them more than to her—it is with a bit of received wisdom that no one would hold against him: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” Never mind that Matthew salts Jesus’ personal genealogy with Canaanite women like Tamar (1:3), Rahab (1:5) and Ruth (1:5). He is otherwise at pains to show that the Messiah came in the fulfillment of the Jewish law and prophets, that he is Israel’s hope and consolation. There are plenty of lost sheep from his own fold to attend to—let the Canaanites deal with the Canaanites.

But this woman will not take a snub for no. She advances toward him, kneels down in the traditional suppliant position, and begs, “Lord, help me.”

Jesus’ response is not only negative, it is an outrageous put-down. Perhaps she doesn’t understand: he’s a shepherd, his flock consists of Jews, it is they who are the children of Abraham and therefore of God. Why on earth would he throw pearls to swine or “take children’s food and throw it to the dogs?”

A kneeling woman does not have far to fall, and by all rights that insult should have floored her on the spot. After all, what is a desperate Canaanite to do after such a slap but slink off into the crowd, take her place in the filthy streets among the dogs where she belongs, and go back to the daughter still in a demon’s grip?

But not this lady. She parries with Jesus as if she were Portia or some other Shakespearian heroine who gets her man by using her wits. “Yes, Lord,” she answers, continuing to accord him the respect of a Kyrie and initially agreeing with what he just said. But then she comes back with a subtle variation on his theme: “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” He regarded Canaanites as wild dogs; she accepts this. She does not presume to be invited to the table. But what about the scraps gathered from underfoot?

Matthew does not give us any indication of whether Jesus smiled at her word play and her cunning, or whether he accorded her the ancient Palestinian equivalent of, “You go, girl!” We don’t know what he felt at losing an argument. What’s clear is that he recognized truth when he heard it and saw a gentile ready to be part of a flock much bigger than the one he had been sent to. “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.”

The Canaanite woman’s persistence not only made her daughter whole; it also showed Jesus the larger world he had come to listen to and heal.