

Boundless discipleship: Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28

How do we determine and define what is pure and wholesome?

by [Karoline M. Lewis](#) in the [August 12, 2008](#) issue

The problem with Matthew 15:21-28 lies in the portrait of Jesus as neither the Jesus we have come to know and love nor, if we are honest, a Jesus we particularly like. The optional verses in the lectionary (Matt. 15:10-20) may elicit Peter's reaction: "Explain yourself, Jesus!"

Critical to interpreting and preaching this passage, however, is to hold both Gennesaret (the location of vv. 10-20) and Tyre and Sidon together. In 14:34, Jesus and his disciples have landed at Gennesaret after the events of Jesus walking on water and stilling the storm. In Gennesaret, the Pharisees and scribes come to Jesus from Jerusalem and question him about issues regarding purity. It is in this context that we arrive at our optional pericope for this week. Jesus calls the crowd to him and addresses the disciples directly, essentially offering commentary on his dialogue with the Pharisees and continuing the focus on the question of defilement.

Then Jesus turns the issue of defilement or purity on its head by going into the gentile territory of Tyre and Sidon, two coastal cities in Phoenicia and north of the Galilean region. Verse 22 emphasizes not only the status of "a Canaanite woman" but also Jesus' location in Tyre and Sidon. Reminding us that Jesus is far from Galilee and Jerusalem suggests that defilement and purity are not determined by physical, attributable or demonstrative components (the argument of the Pharisees).

Yet, ironically, although purity or defilement is not determined by what one eats or where one is, purity is ultimately assessed by what one says and does. Jesus' geographical location after his conversation with the Pharisees does not seem coincidental. Situating Jesus in gentile country and reporting a conversation with a Canaanite suggests that what should defile does not and calls into question traditional views of defilement and purity. Jesus asks us the same questions. What are our operating assumptions about defilement or corruption? How do we

determine and define what is pure and wholesome?

While many sermons on verses 21-28 have legitimately focused on the Canaanite woman's persistence of faith, another way to view this text takes into account that her faith was great not only because she was persistent, but also because her persistence demonstrates her faith. When she presses Jesus with her request, "Lord, help me," she shows what is in her heart. Her words and actions are the living out of her confession, "Lord, Son of David." Her faith in Jesus to heal her daughter compels her proclamation of her faith and her persistence in securing Jesus' response.

In effect, the Canaanite woman becomes the explanation of the parable that Peter, on behalf of the disciples, asks Jesus to give. She is the model of what it looks like when what is in the heart and what comes out of the mouth correlate. She is herself, according to all intents and purposes, in a constant state of defilement and impurity according to the standards set by her location, by the official representatives from Jerusalem and even by Jesus' disciples (who want her sent away). But Jesus reveals that traditions and traditionalism need questioning and rethinking when he enters a land that represents impurity, calls upon Isaiah to thwart the Pharisees and grants the woman's request. Her persistence, therefore, is not only representative of what comes from her heart or her faith; it suggests her own questioning and rethinking of traditional boundaries, ideas and rituals. We might even wonder if Jesus' response is not only to her demonstrative faith, but also to her willingness to challenge tradition as he has done.

To what extent, then, is this woman from Phoenicia, in her modeling of faith, defining what discipleship should be? Is discipleship not just following Jesus but also doing what Jesus does? In the exchange between Jesus and the Canaanite woman, Jesus shows his disciples what it means to make disciples of all nations. His location, actions and words all address the traditions, limitations and boundaries that the disciples will encounter. By pushing at, dismantling and crossing over the boundaries that the disciples might themselves put on "all nations," Jesus foreshadows his intention to declare the boundaries of the great commission to be limitless.

It is hardly accidental that the woman's "great faith" follows Peter's demonstration of "little faith" (14:31). The comparison suggests the importance of faith, but the interactions between the two characters and Jesus as well as the settings in which the exchanges take place suggest that there is more at stake. Aware of his limitations, Peter begins to sink into the stormy waters of the sea and then calls

upon Jesus, “Lord, save me” (14:30). The woman, aware of her location and the limitations placed on her, does not succumb to them but brings them into the light and calls them into question: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

Jesus calls us to a similar kind of discipleship, a discipleship that exposes the boundaries set in place by others and the boundaries we place on ourselves. He calls us to a discipleship that is willing to go past these boundaries and journey into Tyre and Sidon, where Jesus promises to be to the end of the age.