

OLD DOGS, NEW TRICKS

Over these past few months, as the pandemic has raged on, many of us have had to acquire new skills. We've had to learn new ways of thinking and new ways of doing things. Here at church, for instance, I have had to learn how to teach a class using Zoom, how to livestream a worship service and how to rely more fully on conference calls to conduct church business. I've often told folks that all of this just proves you can teach an old dog new tricks.

I got to wondering about the origins of that old saying. So, I looked it up and discovered it is considered one of the oldest idiomatic expressions in the English language, dating back to at least 1523. John Fitzherbert published a short volume called "The boke of husbandry," a how-to manual if you will, for farmers, shepherds, beekeepers and their wives. In one section he writes about training sheepdogs. A shepherd, he writes, "must teach his dog to bark when he would have him, to run when he would have him . . . or else he is not a cunning shepherd. The dog must learn it when he is a whelp, or else it will not be: for it is hard to make an old dog . . . stoop." Which, in 16th century England meant to put its nose to the ground to follow a scent. Later that century, in 1546, John Heywood published his famous book of proverbs and idiomatic phrases, which included early variants on proverbs like a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, rolling stones gather no moss, and you can't teach an old dog new tricks. (*The Proverbs of John Heywood*)

Our scripture lesson today is all about an old dog learning a new trick--at least in a manner of speaking. Not that thirty-year-old Jesus was all that old by our standards--but back then in the Roman Empire during the first century the average life expectancy was only thirty-five. So, by the age of thirty or so, one would expect a person to be fairly set in their ways, and firm in their convictions. And certainly, Jesus was the latter. He had a definite set of understandings and beliefs rooted in his Judaism. But as this passage indicates, he was ultimately willing to learn new things, and change his perspective. And further, he expected his disciples to do the same.

There is little question that first century Jews stayed clear of Gentiles--with those who were not Jews. Indeed, earlier in Matthew, when Jesus sends the disciples out on their first mission, he explicitly restricts their movements. "Go nowhere among the Gentiles," he says, "and enter no town of the Samaritans, but rather go to the lost sheep of Israel." (Matthew 10:5-6) Preach to your fellow Jews, he is saying, bring healing to your fellow Israelites, not to the Gentiles or Samaritans.

But this story takes place in Gentile territory, the region of Tyre and Sidon, to the north of Galilee. So why is Jesus here at all? Is he just passing through? Perhaps. But it may be

because tucked in among the Gentile towns and villages there were also a few Jewish towns. Perhaps he was planning on teaching and healing in those places when he is stopped along the way by this Canaanite woman. Canaanites were the ancient enemies of Israel, and they worshipped many gods. There is no reason to believe Jesus was intending a special outreach to the pagans--his mission, as he understood it, was to reach his own people. As one scholar writes, "This story is not about Jesus taking initiative for a mission to Gentiles; it is, rather, about a Gentile woman taking the initiative to encounter Jesus." (Jae Won Lee, *Feasting on the Word*, A:3, 359)

Her sudden appearance in the gospel narrative is rather jarring. And most likely it was for Jesus as well. In both Gentile and Jewish culture, it was considered inappropriate for a woman to act the way she does. Women were expected to keep their distance, especially from teachers and leaders. She was supposed to be quiet and demure, respectful in every regard. But she is not. In fact, she is anything but.

Perhaps Jesus and two or three of the disciples are having a deep conversation about some matter of theology, when suddenly they are interrupted by her shouts. She wants to be sure she draws his attention, for she has heard this man from Nazareth has healing powers. "Son of David! Lord!" She loudly assaults his ears, hoping to gain his attention. "Have mercy on me!" Give me a moment of your time! My daughter is in trouble. Deep trouble. She is possessed. Tormented by a demon!" The woman tries her best to gain a hearing. But he is silent. He ignores her continual cries.

The disciples, sensing that he is annoyed by her persistence, tell him to just send her away. "You don't need to put up with this Gentile nonsense. She's only going to keep bothering us until you do."

Finally, Jesus speaks. Probably he is addressing the disciples, but she overhears. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," he says. Her problems are not mine to deal with. She is none of my concern. But she will not relent. She throws herself at his feet. "Lord," she cries, "help me!" Some people just don't take a hint. He's tried to explain his reasoning, but she does not give up.

But neither does he. There is only so much of him to go around. He has specific work to do with his own people. And there are lots of them. How can he find the time, the energy, to do more than that? "It's not fair," he says, "to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Whoa! Dogs? That's about as low as one can go! There was no such thing as a cuddly lap dog back then. Dogs weren't much better than pigs. As Kenneth Bailey writes, "Dogs[were] never pets. They [were] kept as half-wild guard dogs or left to wander unattended as

dangerous street scavengers who [subsisted] on garbage.” (*Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 224) Bug off, lady. You and your kind are no better than a pack of dogs.

We don't like to read this story, do we. Where is gentle Jesus? Where is kind, accepting Jesus? Who is this man who insults this poor woman by calling her a dog? But there it is. Right in the middle of Matthew. For that matter, it shows up in the Gospel of Mark as well. Over the centuries, commentators have often tried to explain it away, saying Jesus was just trying to get the attention of his disciples to show them the error of their biased ways of thinking about Gentiles. But that's reading a whole lot into the text that's not there. The plain reading of it suggests Jesus was operating out of the commonplace bias of his day. Gentiles just aren't much good, and hardly worthy of one's time and attention.

But in this Canaanite woman, he has met his match. She is not about to put up with his prejudicial remarks. She's not about to be put off by his name-calling. She is going to push her case right up to the very edge. “Yes Lord,” she snaps back, “yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” (27) Call me all the names you want, I need help. My kid is sick, she's possessed. She needs help--and you can provide it. And I'm going to do whatever I can to get it.

And finally, the eyes of Jesus are finally pried open. He sees her in a whole new light. He realizes that she too is a child of God. That her daughter can be, will be, healed by divine love. “Woman,” he says, “great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!” (15:28a) And with that an old dog has learned a new trick.

There is no record of the disciples' response to all this, save the fact that the story has been preserved. Arguably it is a fairly embarrassing account. I mean, it doesn't show Jesus in the best light, does it? Yet, maybe in its own way it does. Because it demonstrates that even the one we call Savior, Lord, Son of God, even he could be blinded by prejudice and stereotypes. But once he was exposed to the truth, he was willing to learn, willing to change. As one scholar writes, “Jesus is big enough not to be ashamed to learn something from a Gentile Canaanite woman.” (FTW361) Maybe the disciples' realized that they too needed to be big enough to not let shame or guilt get in the way of learning something new about God's view of humanity, and their need to adopt that open stance.

As children across the nation are returning to school, teachers and parents and others, are having to learn many new tricks, many new ways of coping in the midst of the pandemic. And if we as a society are to work our way out of the pandemic, we as a society we will need to learn many new tricks. Many new ways of moving through life.

And so too as we deal with the stain of racism that has impaired our nation for centuries. Those of us who are white needn't wallow in guilt, we needn't be overcome by shame. We

need, simply, to be like Jesus and show a willingness to learn and to change. It will not be easy--such things never are. Not easy for those who time and time again find themselves throwing themselves in the path of those of us who are privileged, and not easy for those of us who must examine the way our society has been shaped to our advantage. But it is work we can do. Work we must do.

But take hope, whether it is dealing with the pandemic, or racism, or climate change or any of the other ills that beset us as a society and as individuals, for old dogs can learn new tricks. Just ask Jesus, he'll tell you. People can change. Thank God!

Amen

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