

It Is Not Fair
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Matthew 15:21-28
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“It is not fair,”¹ Jesus says. And it isn’t. It *just* isn’t fair. This might be the truest thing that Jesus says in the Gospels. Or at least, that’s how it seemed this week when on Monday morning, I was greeted with two phone calls about church members that had died and another member that was in the hospital. I couldn’t agree more with Jesus’ words. It is *not* fair.

And yet, however appropriate these words might seem, Jesus isn’t offering sympathy. No. What Jesus says is that “it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”² These are not words of sympathy – but words of accusation toward a woman who asked for mercy because her daughter is tormented by a demon. It’s just one demon in the Gospel Lesson, rather than the three phone calls that greeted me this week. It’s just one member of her community. But as you probably know, when it’s a member of your own family, it hurts that much more.

And how does Jesus respond to her plea for help? He calls her dog! *This* is not fair! She only asked for help. The disciples have done their usual bit of telling her to keep quiet – but doesn’t Jesus *usually* correct them? Doesn’t he usually insist upon justice even when the disciples think he’s crazy? Isn’t that what Jesus does? Isn’t that his thing to insist that the realm of God is for all people?

Not here, it seems. *Here*, Jesus insists that he has come only for the “lost sheep of the house of Israel.”³ And so, this woman has no place. She has no right to ask for mercy. She’s a Canaanite, not part of the house of Israel, and so she doesn’t deserve it. Or at least, that’s Matthew’s explanation. He labels this woman – even more unfavorably than Jesus has – as a Canaanite. But, she’s not *just* a Canaanite. Jesus calls her a dog. *Lord, have mercy!*

¹ Matthew 15:26, NRSV.

² Matthew 15:26, NRSV.

³ Matthew 15:24, NRSV.

Ironically, that's what she wants. That's all she wants. She asks Jesus simply for *mercy*. She doesn't ask for pity or even compassion. She doesn't want him to feel sorry for her.

She doesn't want anyone to feel sorry for her. She can handle her own. She's not like Ruth, at least not according to Charlott Porter's reading. Charlott will tell you that Ruth is a dumb blonde who will go along with anything that anyone says.⁴ But, not this woman. She's not like Ruth. She doesn't care that Jesus didn't answer at first.⁵ She ignores his immediate rejection of her in favor of the "lost sheep of the house of Israel."⁶ She doesn't just go along with what Jesus says. This woman plops herself beside Jesus and calls him "Lord."⁷ Lord, she says, love me.

And when he tries to dismiss her again by talking about fairness, she persists. "Yes, Lord," she says, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table."⁸

Jesus doesn't rush to embrace her, but that's all I want to do. I want to hug her for her insistence that she deserves something – even if it's just the crumbs that fall off the table. I want to hug her for her stubborn assurance that she deserves to be loved no matter what demons face her.

I want to hug her just as I wanted to rush to the podium at the POWER Healthcare Truth Commission in June to embrace the 12 individuals that were brave enough to tell their stories. Portland Organizing to Win Economic Rights (better known by its acronym POWER) brought these 12 voices together to tell the truth about being without healthcare or without enough healthcare in our country. I was there as a Commissioner. I sat in the front of this room in my clerical collar to offer a blessing. Even though it was a secular setting, I was there to listen to a truth that was difficult to hear and offer the simple comfort that these stories had been heard.

So, there I sat. Listening to the first few brave souls to take the podium. Listening to heart-wrenching stories before a woman moved to the podium to

⁴ Charlott Porter made this remark at Beach Chair Theology earlier this week in our discussion of the third chapter of Ruth.

⁵ Matthew 15:23, NRSV.

⁶ Matthew 15:24, NRSV.

⁷ Matthew 15:25, NRSV.

⁸ Matthew 15:27, NRSV.

read an testimony on behalf of Nonnie, a 61 year old woman that lives right here in South Portland.

I didn't get to look in Nonnie's eyes. I couldn't rush up to the podium and embrace her. Another woman stood before me and read Nonnie's words of a long history of medical complications – and there were *so many* complications throughout Nonnie's life. This was her demon. For 25 years, she has struggled with this demon – in all of its various forms.

I'm not sure that the particular details of her medical complications matter. But as I listened to her story, I wondered about Nonnie as I wonder about the Canaanite woman. I wondered if she has turned to our own Community Crisis Ministry for support *or* if Nonnie was too embarrassed after being trampled down by the healthcare system. Is that why she wasn't there on that June night to tell her own story? Had she been made to feel that she didn't deserve mercy? And then, just as I thought her demon would break my heart, the testimony was concluded with Nonnie's own persistent reminder, in her own words:

My whole life I have worked hard, paid taxes, obeyed the law and played by the rules. I've lead a decent, healthy lifestyle and avoided drugs and alcohol. My only crime is that I have had the misfortune of having medical problems. And so, for now, here I am waiting to reach Medicare age, praying that I won't have another major hospitalization.⁹

Lord, have mercy! Can't you just see her plopped down beside Jesus? There is no need for pity or mere compassion for Nonnie. Like the Canaanite woman, Nonnie deserves love. It is all she asks. Both Nonnie and the Canaanite woman simply ask for mercy. Nonnie doesn't argue about *how* this mercy should come to her just as the Canaanite woman doesn't insist upon how her daughter's torment should end.

The only question of fairness that both women raise is that they should be loved – without questions of heritage or complicated paperwork. It is only fair that these women should be loved – and yet, it seems that both women must be persistent. Jesus doesn't listen anymore than our current healthcare system protects Nonnie. Still, these women persist.

⁹ Nonnie's Testimony at Portland Organizing to Win Economic Rights Healthcare Truth Commission, 10 June 2008.

Like the Canaanite woman, Nonnie asks us all to listen to the truth – to *her* truth – because as Jesus says it isn't fair. But, if Jesus can change his mind upon hearing a woman's words, aren't we challenged to have our minds changed as well? Isn't it our task to embrace those that are brave enough to tell their stories and proclaim, as Jesus does, "Great is your faith!"¹⁰

¹⁰ Matthew 15:28, NRSV.