

Did Jesus mean to call her that, or was he just having a bad day?

A sermon on Matthew 15:10-28 by Nathan Nettleton, 20 August 2017

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Message

Even for Jesus, and certainly for us, there is sometimes the need to be jolted into the reality of what God's new revelation of grace is all about.

Sermon

There has been some fairly bizarre stuff happening in the news while I've been away, and I'm only slowly catching up on it all. It seems that our politicians have been disgracing themselves in their eagerness to exploit some new discoveries about citizenship, and in the process I've discovered that, unbeknown to me, I'm still a New Zealand citizen, and therefore so is my Australian born daughter. It seems that politicians can't resist point-scoring even when it is obviously rebounding on their own team.

And speaking of point-scoring, the same-sex marriage debate has taken a few twists and turns in my absence. First it looked like it was suddenly about to pass the parliament. Then it didn't. And now we're even deeper into a dangerous and damaging campaign in which the most appalling things are being said with no regard for who might get hurt.

Then there was the bizarre stunt by Pauline Hanson who, by wearing a burkha into Parliament, sought to further fan the fires of fear and hatred. And those fears that she seeks to exploit reared their head again with the horrific attack in Barcelona, which was especially confronting for me and Margie, because Margie had been walking down that very Las Ramblas street just a few days before the attack.

In the midst of all these things, we usually find that both sides are so appalled by the other that they see them as epitomising all that is wrong with the world. Fingers are pointed and allegations are made and curses are called down. Shocking and derogatory things are said, and people find it increasingly difficult to imagine that there might be anything in the other side that could be loved or accepted by God. We are the agents of God's will confronting them, the dehumanising forces of hatred and fear.

But one of the most disturbing things about God's grace is that it reaches out to other people too. Grace always seems amazing and wonderful when it breaks through the barriers of guilt or fear that keep us locked out of God's love and acceptance, but it is much more disturbing when it breaks through the barriers that protect us from nasty people who we fear and distrust. When God's grace kicks down those sorts of walls, and invites in those sort of people, we can find ourselves shocked, even appalled. Has God got no standards? It shakes us to the core. It may have even shaken Jesus to the core.

The gospel reading set for us this week is one that is very difficult to deal with because it shows Jesus in a light that we're not used to seeing him in. And just in case we thought we'd heard it wrong, someone else in the story tells him that he's wrong and he concedes the point and changes his ways. Let me put myself in the story instead and see what you'd think if you heard this story about me.

Someone else from the church comes up to you and tells you the following story:

I was doing some gardening outside the church when I saw a young Aboriginal bloke, maybe about 25 years old, go up to the front door of the church. He rang the bell and Nathan answered the door. The aboriginal bloke said, "Please Pastor, my little daughter's only five years old and she's in hospital after being hit by a car. The doctors don't know whether she'll live or die. I don't know what to do. I don't even know how to pray. Could you sit down and pray for her with me?"

But Nathan replied, "It's not my job to pray with you. I'm employed to work with the church people, and you're not one of them."

"But please Reverend. I won't take up much of your time. Please help me."

But Nathan just said, "Look mate, these church people pay good money to employ me and it's not fair to use up the time they've paid for on a lazy bludger like you. Get out of here."

Now what would you think if you heard that story. You'd be sending me on my way and suggesting I go back to truck driving, I think. And rightly so. But isn't that exactly what Jesus does in the story in Matthew 15?

And to make it worse, in the first part of the story he has just said that a person is not defiled by what goes into their mouth, but what comes out of it, and then immediately we are shocked by what comes out of his mouth. Sure we're used to Jesus offending the Pharisees and other religious experts like he does in verse 12, but this is not someone trumpeting their own righteousness, this is an ordinary gentile woman in great need and seeking help for her daughter.

Jesus's response to her may be even worse than it looks in our polite English translations. The Greek word translated "dogs" here is actually the feminine form of the word, so if we really want to take seriously the words of scripture we may have to deal with the likelihood that Jesus said something like, "It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to a bitch like you."

So what on earth is going on here? Did Jesus really mean to call her a bitch or was he just having a bad day? It seems to me that there are two or three possibilities in trying to understand Jesus's response, and none of them make it much easier.

The first possibility is that Jesus is having a very bad day. He's been dealing with lots of sick people already and in the midst of that he's had the religious thought police hassling him. He's already been getting pretty harsh with them, and now when he tries to get away for a bit of peace and quiet, someone else is demanding a piece of him. He runs out of patience and snaps at her, but then recovers his composure, commends her faith and grants her request. The trouble with that theory is that, having just said that what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, it doesn't say much for the state of Jesus's heart. What comes out of his mouth is not just words of tiredness and frustration, but words of insult and put-down.

A second possibility is that perhaps what Jesus said isn't as bad as it sounds. Perhaps in another culture and with a different tone of voice and a sparkle in his eye, we'd understand that Jesus was not being offensive at all. Many biblical commentators have taken this explanation on the text. Some have argued that the word "dog" is in the diminutive form and so means "puppies" and it's hard to talk about puppies without being playful. Unfortunately most Greek scholars don't accept that translation, and even if you do, it doesn't help that much to have Jesus playing games with this woman when her need is so serious and her pleas are so specific. Even if he was winking and talking of puppies, it still sounds patronising at best.

A third possibility is that perhaps Jesus is a product of his environment. A few years ago I had a New Testament teacher named Edwin Broadhead. Eddie had grown up in the Deep South of the USA and he reckoned that he was about 17 years of age before he realised that there was any other way of thinking about black people than the racist way of the culture he grew up in. He suggested that perhaps Jesus was in a similar position in this story.

Every Israelite kid grew up thinking of themselves as being members of the chosen race and everyone else as godless gentiles who didn't deserve God's love and care. Now since Jesus was fully human, and since the gospels actually tell us that he grew in wisdom and in favour with God as he grew up, then does it seem unreasonable to think that Jesus would have taken for granted the prejudices of his environment until he was confronted with the need to question them? I can't quite imagine Jesus the toddler being aware of the shortcomings of his culture and able to denounce racism before starting school.

Eddie saw this story as the moment when Jesus became aware of gentiles as equally loved by God and equally deserving of the mercy of God. The moment his eyes are opened he repents (has a change of heart) and acts differently from then on. One problem with that theory is that Jesus has already healed the servant of a Roman Centurion earlier in Matthew's gospel, but that may just make him even more a product of his age – this time he's being sexist and elitist as well as racist. Or it might just mean that these stories are not preserved in chronological order.

Now that's about as many serious possibilities as I can come up with to explain Jesus's behaviour and all of them leave us with some tough questions. Even if we can come up with another explanation that casts Jesus in a more favourable light, we still have to deal with the fact that this woman argued with Jesus and Jesus conceded that she was right, he was wrong, and that he needed to respond to her with a measure of grace that he had initially thought he could withhold. If repentance means a change of heart and a consequent change of behaviour, then in this story we see Jesus repenting. And that raises problems for our usual doctrine of the sinless perfection of Jesus.

Or does it? There are two different ways of thinking about human perfection and sinlessness. There is a static view that comes out of Greek philosophy that sees sinless perfection as the peak of human moral possibility. You have to grow into it and so you're not perfect until you get there. Alternatively there is a growth view that comes more out of Hebrew spirituality that sees sinless perfection more as a steady growth towards godliness, a growth that at each new possibility grows in the right direction.

Let me illustrate by going back to my teacher, Eddie Broadhead. Eddie argued that until he became aware that there were other ways of thinking about black people, his racial prejudice could not be described as a sin in the sense of it being something for which he could be held personally culpable. A child cannot choose whether or not to be influenced by the only environment they know.

However, from the moment he became aware that there were alternative ways of thinking he became capable of choice and therefore responsible for the progress of his attitudes in that area. Once he could choose between a racist response to a person and another response, any specific choice for the racist option would have been a sin for which he was personally culpable. The sinlessness of Jesus did not mean that he didn't inherit the racist assumptions of his culture. Instead it meant that as soon as he became aware of the alternative he was able to consistently move beyond those assumptions into greater godliness.

Now if this is the Biblical view of Jesus's sinlessness, and it seems to make much more sense of the stories we have, then that is kind of exciting. Because that means that the sinlessness of Jesus, rather than being something that puts him in an entirely different realm from us and thereby beyond our comprehension, is actually something that is a genuine example for us to follow. Sure, we'll make a lot more mistakes than him and we already have, but every time we are confronted with a new challenge to change and grow and we get it right, or at least partly right, we are genuinely following in the footsteps of Jesus.

One thing is for sure. If even Jesus underestimated the grace of God and had to be shaken into recognising some people as loved by God, then you can bet your last dollar that no matter how broad minded some of us may be, none of us are yet beyond being shocked by who God is willing to love and welcome into the Kingdom!