

**“What does NO mean? Principle before Personality”**  
**Romans 11: 1,2a, 29-32                      Matthew 15:21-28**

No one likes to be overlooked or looked past. Have you every had the experience of shaking hands with someone and you could tell that while they were shaking hands with you, they were already looking for someone else over your shoulder? I doubt if there is anyone here who has not had that experience from both sides of that perspective, both the overlooked and the overlooker.

Not too long ago I had a conversation with a colleague right after our Annual Conference. He was a bit miffed because at the beginning of Annual Conference while looking at books at the Cokesbury display he had seen our Bishop and had gone up to shake his hand and greet him. He said the Bishop barely shook his hand and seemed more interested in picking up some books he had ordered than in engaging in conversation. He felt overlooked, and he wasn't happy about that. Let me hasten to add, that is not characteristic of our Bishop's demeanor. He is usually very attentive, but none of us are immune from being distracted at times.

It is our custom after most worship services to stand and greet people as they leave the sanctuary. While I was on family leave and sabbatical before coming to serve this congregation I experienced, for the first time in many years, what it is like to stand in line to shake hands with the preacher. One particular church in which we worshipped frequently with my Mother I don't think the Pastor ever did look me in the eye when we shook hands.

It is very possible that there may be some of you who would say the same thing about me. Little things can make a big difference, and it is a reminder to me that there is none of us, including the preacher who stands in front of you, that is not in need of forgiveness.

No one likes to be overlooked. Can you imagine what it would be like to be overlooked all the time simply because of what you looked like? Several years ago I knew a young woman who was very sharp, both beautiful and talented. Despite her youth she had a real inner strength and was on a spiritual quest in her life. She was exploring the faith of Islam and was especially attracted by the virtue of modesty for women. She made the decision to become a practicing Muslim and married a young man who was from a Northern African country. He was very devout and that attracted her. She practiced the custom that is common to many, not all, but many Muslim women of covering as an expression of modesty. That means only her face was visible but not her hair.

They lived here in Florida and at the beginning of their marriage she needed to look for a job. She had previously lived several places in Florida and had developed a real confidence in job interviews, but this time she could not secure employment to save her life. No one said it out loud, but it was very obvious that

she was being overlooked because of how she dressed. No one took the time to evaluate her character. I think she could very well identify with the Canaanite woman in today's gospel.

There may not be anyone here who has had that experience but there are probably some of you who also know that it is like to be overlooked or under-considered. You may have had the experience of not being given a fair chance because of gender bias or being either too old or too young. Being over-looked and under-considered is something that our brothers and sister in our Hispanic mission often deal with on a daily basis.

It is also just as true that we can also identify with the disciples who were all too eager for Jesus to get rid of this woman who kept yelling at them. No one I know is fond of being yelled at or badgered either, and it appears that, in this case at least, Jesus himself was not immune from that aversion to being yelled at either. At least that is what his behavior and words seem to indicate. So let's take a closer look at this unusual gospel that we can identify with, perhaps in ways that we would rather not admit.

Jesus has just finished an involved discussion with the religious authorities who were challenging him because his followers didn't conform to the commonly accepted religious practices of the day. Jesus doesn't rush this. He takes a lot of time with them. Then he speaks about true piety not being measured by outward conformity but by what comes out of our heart, which are the choices we make and the words we choose and the way we choose to be in relationship with the world.

He then leaves the land of Israel and goes as far north as the gospels record him traveling, to Tyre and Sidon. We are not told why he goes there, but we do know that he crosses borders and boundaries to get there. He is accosted by a woman identified as a Canaanite, who are ancient enemies of the people of Israel, and she is shouting. But whatever her volume, she is pleading with Jesus for mercy for her daughter tormented by a demon. She refers to Jesus as "Lord" and "Son of David," both very respectful titles.

Up until now, every other place in the gospel where Jesus has been approached with a request for mercy or a request for healing, he has responded, he has responded immediately and with great compassion and love. But not here. At first, he answers her only with silence. We are not given an explanation. We don't have to read the disciples minds – they want Jesus to get rid of her, and his answer to them seems to agree with their ignoring her request.

But this woman comes even closer and kneels in front of Jesus and simply says, "Help me." And he responds with a retort in which he compares her to a dog. I am familiar with a number of different explanations of this. Some just say it is an inexcusable slur. Some say Jesus actually had great confidence in this woman

and was seeking to actualize her faith in a very profound way. Jesus has just finished telling his followers that “what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.”<sup>1</sup> There have been seasons in which I have leaned one way or the other, but I don’t really think that Jesus is depending on this preacher, or any preacher to defend him or explain him. I simply don’t have an explanation here, but what continues to fascinate me in this interaction is that this retort did not end the conversation.

The woman stayed right there. She did not slink away. And Jesus remained there as well. He did not rush off to his next appointment. They both remained engaged, and from somewhere deep within herself the woman summoned up, of all things, a joke. She turned what sounded like a slur, what was a slur, into a joke. And Jesus gets it. And he not only gets it but he is also transformed by her presence. And he responds to her with reverence and respect by saying, “Woman, great is your faith.”

It is hardly a coincidence that only last week Peter’s attempt at being spectacular by walking on water was rescued from disaster by Jesus saving hand. Jesus said to Peter, the symbolic leader of the community of faith, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” In Peter’s case, it was when he allowed his attention to be come distracted by the strong winds and he became aware of his limitations that he begins to sink in to the stormy waters of the sea.

But this Canaanite woman was also very much aware of who she was and all the limitations that bound her. This Canaanite woman did not have the safety of a boat or the support of a community to sustain her. She is fully aware of the treachery of the waters in which she swims but she does not succumb to them. She may be labeled one of the dogs, but she is a feisty dog and she calls all of that into question by her response, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

The Jewish people have a word for this. They call it *chutzpah*, true grit. You can call her anything you want, but it will not faze her. This was more faith and determination than Jesus had witnessed in his own disciples. They were paralyzed by fear while still in a perfectly good boat. I don’t think that it is an exaggeration to say that this Canaanite woman, whatever her name was, gave Jesus a tremendous gift. Her *chutzpah* helped turn the light on for him so that he could see that he could not put a limit on his mission, and she did this by being willing to be a persistent dog nipping at his heels that would not go away, no matter what dirty looks the disciples sent her way, no matter how much he gave her the silent treatment, no matter what insults he hurled her way.

This gospel asks us all a question. Who are the dogs in our life? Now wait a second. Before your thoughts start turning all warm and fuzzy about your favorite, cute and smart four-legged canine, I can empathize with that because I

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 15:18

love dogs as well. But that is not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the people in your life who annoy you, who you would rather not deal with. The people who make you roll your eyes, who make you say to yourself when you see them approaching, "Oh, brother. Here we go again."

The dogs in our lives are the people we pre-judge. They are the people we dismiss because they look different or act differently than we do. We can't understand their music or their style of clothing or why they have so many tattoos or rings poked in different body parts.

The dogs are the people that we make fun of or complain about - at least in our head, and maybe even out loud - as soon as they pass by and are out of hearing. They speak with a different language or a funny accent. It is "understood" that their values are not as good as ours, and their faith is suspect as well. We are actually not really concerned if they have any faith at all, because they most certainly are dogs.

You and I like to look at other people and decide who's a dog and who is not. We are sure we have it all figured out. There is a very clear, if unspoken assumption here, and the assumption is that we are not dogs

Before Jesus ministry went to the dogs, he seemed to have a pretty good idea what his ministry was all about. This Woman, full of chutzpah, changed him. It's the only argument that Jesus ever lost, well not quite, he lost in the garden of Gethsemane as well. Most of us live in relative comfort, and it is very tempting to become so used to our comfort that we don't even realize that we need to be converted from looking down on other races, thinking that somehow we matter more to God than people of other nations. When we live in such comfort we can't, for the life of us, figure out why others are yelling so loud. Why can't we just make them go away?

This woman who would not go away is an icon of God's persistent care for the most needy as she has the courage to be the voice of those who are caught in forces over which they have no control. The challenge for you and me is to hear that she speaks for us as well, because "the day the gospel went to the dogs was the day it came to us. The dogs are not just "those people." WE are some of the dogs who have received the good news of the gospel! When Jesus opened himself up to mission to the whole world, he opened his church to the world."<sup>2</sup> In doing so he opened the church to us as well.

So another question for us is, "Are we willing to witness to the world in truth and love no matter how much they may bark at us?"

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Woof. Woof.

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<sup>2</sup> Heidi Husted in "The Christian Century." (August 16, 2000)

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