

Three Mothers in the Gospels Sunday, 7/26/20

Are there any passages in the Bible that make you wince? Surely the Old Testament passages describing the killing and conquest of the Canaanites in the Promised Land belong in that category, and even some of the seemingly impossible standards of love given to us by Jesus in the New Testament. But there's another kind of Bible passage that seems out of character or confusing, like our earlier reading from Matthew 15, when Jesus called the distraught and begging mother a "dog." Really? This isn't exactly the warm and smiling Jesus you met in Sunday School, is it?

Imagine how you might feel if you were praying for healing for your sick child and Jesus said to you, "It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs."¹ That's harsh, Jesus! It makes me frown when I read it, and I have to admit it's not a text I usually run to when I'm planning a sermon. Let's see if we can understand this woman a little better and Jesus's response to her.

Have you ever had a child, or someone you're very close to, that's suffering? I'm guessing everyone can think of at least one person in their life, either in the past or present, that's suffered. Think about that suffering right now, and specifically, remember how witnessing that suffering made you feel. Did you feel desperate, unable to do anything to help your loved one? Was there anything you wouldn't have done to bring them relief and put an end to your own angst? Surely that's how this mother was feeling, asking for Jesus to grant her mercy, both for her daughter's sake and the sake of her own torment as her mother.

There's another part of this woman's story that's opaque to us but would have been clear to ancient readers, a background that largely explains the seemingly callous attitude of Jesus and his disciples. Based on geography, this woman would have been a Canaanite, one of the people groups most despised by Jews, even more so than the Samaritans.² You might recall from your Old Testament reading that the term "Canaanite" means resident of Canaan, the people living in the area the Jews claimed as the land promised to them by God after the exodus from slavery in Egypt. Unlike the Samaritans, the Canaanites didn't worship one God, but a variety of deities, and especially local fertility deities like Baal. In the Exodus,

¹ Matthew 15:26. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

² Craig S. Keener. The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament.

Jews killed countless Canaanites in a land grab somewhat reminiscent of the Manifest Destiny claimed by American settlers in driving out indigenous peoples in the western United States. As the Jews took land, they were prohibited from marrying Canaanites because of their worship of false Gods. For a Canaanite woman to approach Jesus and ask for a healing might be loosely comparable to a white, atheist police officer going into a black, urban Mosque and asking for prayer in the immediate aftermath of the recent riots. It's not the picture you'd expect to see.

Stereotypes and prejudices are cultivated over long years and passed down through generations, and they certainly aren't new to us today. The response of the Disciples to this woman was ugly, and perhaps Jesus was honestly exposing that ugliness, knowing that it would provide a teaching moment. Imagine her surprise, and even more so, the surprise of the disciples, when he granted her mercy and healed her daughter!

The lesson is pretty simple, even if the historical background is not. Receiving the mercy of Jesus is a matter of persistent faith, not your hometown, church membership, or family tree. Her daughter was healed, and the woman's anxiety for her loved one was healed as well. Have you ever had your prayers answered in that way? I have. It's a great relief, and a reminder that God does sometimes choose to intervene and grant us mercy in exactly the way we ask.

Let's turn to the Gospel of Luke now for another example of the mercy of Jesus, this time for a grieving mother who lost her only son. I'm reading in Chapter 7, beginning with verse 11, in the New Living translation. {[Read Luke 7:11-15, NLT](#)}

In the story of our first mother, it was she who crossed cultural boundaries to seek healing. In our second account, it's Jesus, who does the unthinkable and interrupts a funeral procession, even going so far as to touch the stretcher bearing the dead body. The NLT reads "coffin," but really the body would have been simply wrapped in cloth.³ While many in the crowd would have been aghast at Jesus' intrusion, I wonder if the woman recognized Jesus was as he approached, and perhaps experienced the slightest flicker of hope even then. Or was she so consumed by her grief for her dead son that she simply looked right through

³ Ibid.

everyone else as she walked?

Have you been there? Have you been so enveloped by grief that it's the only thing real to your senses? This is a painting by Pablo Picasso entitled, "Weeping Mother." I'm not normally a Picasso fan, but there's something horribly distraught about this painting that strikes a chord for me when I imagine a mother's grief.

There are so many in our church family who have lost children, parents, siblings, and spouses. We've all read stories about the terrible losses that have been inflicted on families in the current pandemic. Maybe you're still in shock, unable to begin to experience your grief. Maybe you're praying to God to make it all go away, to wake up tomorrow morning to a reality that doesn't include this devastating loss. Maybe you've been praying for weeks, months, or even years for a healing miracle, and the prayers appear to be unanswered as you take your place in a funeral procession. We don't really know anything else about the woman, except that her only son was dead, and she was walking to the tombs with his body.

I can't think of any personal examples I've experienced of someone rising from the dead, although there are certainly plenty of examples of near-death experiences, like the ones we heard earlier in the Second Chances Stories segment. I have prayed for people in intensive care units who have been comatose for over a month, only to walk into their rooms one day and see them sitting up and talking with their family. I've heard stories like that of Dave Jacobs, who should have died on multiple occasions, only to have God's mercy intervene. People do die, every single day, but for some reason known only to God, occasionally the tables are turned on death, and someone is restored to us for a while longer. It happened for the widow of Nain, and it could happen for you as well.

But oftentimes God chooses to answer our prayers in ways that are a pretty distant second place to what we might have asked for. The story of our third mother in distress comes from the Gospel of John, where we read that "Standing near the cross were Jesus' mother, and his mother's sister, Mary (the wife of Clopas), and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother standing there beside the disciple he loved, he said to her, 'Dear woman, here is your son.' And he said to this disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from then

on this disciple took her into his home.”⁴

Let’s be honest about this story and not jump immediately to piety. As obedient, faithful, and virtuous as Mary was, what she wanted more than anything was to hold her son in her arms, and to not see him beaten and crucified in a brutal and humiliating public spectacle. If Mary didn’t pray for his deliverance, as Jesus himself did in the Garden of Gethsemane, then she surely must have held that prayer in her heart. She was his mother—how could she not?

And yet, her need was answered in an unexpected way that she learned to accept. God was merciful to her, even if he didn’t return to her the child she lost. Was John an acceptable substitute? Of course not. Nobody can ever replace another that we’ve grieved. But in the midst of losing Jesus, John stepped into her life to support and care for her as if she were his own mother, and that is no small thing.

How about you? Have you ever been surprised by God’s mercy in the face of a loss, surprised that the answer to your prayer looks nothing like you expected? Or perhaps you’re still waiting for God’s mercy, wondering how long God will allow the torment of grief to ravage your soul. It surely wasn’t easy for Mary to carry her grief, even with the blessing of John added to her life. It probably wasn’t easy for our two other Gospel mothers either. Even after having their children restored to them, their lives were forever changed by their close encounter with Jesus and the reality-altering power of God. It changed the way they saw the world, and it changed the way their communities saw them. Nothing can ever be the same when we see God’s hand of power stretched forth, and never did Jesus promise us that he would make our lives simple or easy.

Jesus has promised, however, that when we turn to him and walk with him, we will find rest for our souls.⁵ Whether you’re a mother, a father, a son, or a daughter, you will experience loss in this world, and you do need rest for your soul. Jesus invites us to demonstrate our faith by asking for what we need, persistently if needed. Just be open to receiving what God has to give you and be prepared to offer thanks for God’s mercy.

Please take some time now to reflect on what you have lost that Jesus can restore. If

⁴ John 19:25-27. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

⁵ Matthew 11:29. Ibid.

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