

# 11th Sunday after Pentecost

13.08.2017  
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## Introduction

This week's lectionary reading has two sections. From the fifteenth chapter of Matthew the lectionary suggests that verses 10-20 are optional and the verses 21-28 are the main reading.

Reading both sections is enlightening — it highlights the artistic brilliance of the authorship of Matthew's gospel.

Often — in Hebrew Bible texts, but sometimes in the Greek New Testament too — there is as much theological information in the *sequence* of events as narrated as in the narration itself.

Here, we hear Jesus speak about words and purity and what comes out of the mouth.

Then we hear him call a Canaanite woman a dog.

Spirituality of Conflict indeed.

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## Text

Matthew 15: [10-20] 21-28

[Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the

heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”]

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

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## Comment

Matthew’s gospel is known for having five sermon-sections, the most notable of which is the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, for a while scholars thought that the five sermons each corresponded to the five books of the Torah. While that notion is mostly deemed as fanciful now, I think it demonstrates how scholars have weighed the sermon aspect of Matthew’s gospel. While Matthew’s text takes pretty much all of the writings of Mark, it doesn’t have the breathtaking speed of Mark, or the stark narrative style of Mark either. Matthew often squeezes the narrative encounter sections together in order to make room for those five sermons.

Here, the lectionary selectors have brought us into a hinge-point. We’re landed into the tail-end of a sermon, a sermon about speech and purity and language makes a person righteous. This then moves immediately into the famous — or perhaps infamous — encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman.

He who’d just said: *‘But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile’* is now interrupted with a woman who throws his slander back to him.

Before we think of slander, it is worthwhile noting the verb for ‘shouting’: This word — *kraz* — can mean to shout out in supplication, or vengeance, or despair. A brief scan of the other times Matthew records this verb for shouting is enlightening.

1. Matt. 8:29 Suddenly they shouted, “What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?”
2. Matt. 9:27 As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, crying loudly, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!”
3. Matt. 14:26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear.
4. Matt. 14:30 But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”
5. Matt. 15:22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” 23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away,

for she keeps shouting after us.”

6. Matt. 20:30 There were two blind men sitting by the roadside. When they heard that Jesus was passing by, they shouted, “Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David!”<sup>31</sup> The crowd sternly ordered them to be quiet; but they shouted even more loudly, “Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!”
7. Matt. 21:9 The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”
8. Matt. 21:15 But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they became angry
9. Matt. 27:23 Then he asked, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Let him be crucified!”
10. Matt. 27:50 Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

In many ways, you could study the verb ‘shout’ in this gospel as an insight into human desperation and the response to it. In the context of this section of Matthew’s gospel, the double-usage is interesting.

Jesus seems strangely unmoved by her shouting, ignoring her. And then the disciples seem to be irritated by her shouting too. Why is this? Is Jesus tired? Has he even heard her? Is it discrimination? Are the disciples urging him to send her away because they feel like they have more important things to do? And why are they urging *Jesus* to send her away?

When she pleads again, Jesus once again demonstrates reluctance: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

It is worthwhile taking a moment to pause here. The author — or authors — of Matthew’s gospel have placed this text right after a text about purity, about what comes *out* of a mouth. Here we have Jesus and the disciples speaking about this woman as if she’s not there, not directly to her, and certainly not in the kind of language we’re accustomed to imagining comes from the mouth of Jesus, especially toward a person who is so desperate, so clearly in need.

Her reply is astounding, and it is particularly rewarding to read it in the Greek:

Her reply is: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

There’s a subtle modification. Jesus has spoken about “food” and she replies with “crumbs”. She’s heard his words, and she’s turning them back to him. Revealing to him that his words were inadequate, perhaps even slanderous.

There’s a pun in the words too. The word for “dogs” — or, to be more accurate, *little* dogs — is *kunarion*. The writers of Matthew have put a rhyming wordplay in her mouth. She says Even the *kunarion* eat the *psichion* (crumbs). With fortitude, desperation, accuracy, modification, wit, intelligence and challenge, she makes Jesus pay attention to his words.

He hears.

He repents.

He praises her.

In Mark's gospel this woman appears as a Syrophonecian, and she is praised for her words — the only person anywhere in the gospel to be praised for words.

It is a text as much about desperation as it is repentance. But it is the repentance of Jesus that is foregrounded. In the face of someone who tossed his words back to him, he listened to himself, and changed. This is necessary in an age where opinions are easy, and quickly broadcasted. How often do we change our minds in public? Is it deemed a virtue, or a take-down? Certainly here, it is seen as part of a divine project, worthy of attention, calling all to be open to the need for accepting the challenge that comes when our words are thrown back to us by people who take their needs more seriously than we do.

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## Response

This Canaanite woman is extraordinary. In her need, she continues to persist. I always wonder how many others may have turned away, whose stories are not included in the gospels. But she didn't. When have we been in this tableau? Who have we been? The Jesus character, using theology and ideology and perhaps even nationality to decide who deserves what? Or the disciples character, urging Jesus to send her away, reluctant to send her away themselves. Perhaps we've been the ill daughter. Or perhaps we've been the woman, desperate and pleading — would we be despondent with such replies?

How can we nurture fortitude like hers?

And how can we repent, like Jesus does, so that such fortitude is not needed?

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## Prayer

Jesus of Nazareth,  
when you met this  
Canaanite Woman,  
you called her a little dog  
but that didn't stop her.

Little dogs need little crumbs,  
she said,  
and you listened,  
repented  
and praised her. .

We praise her too,  
and ask that that we can speak like her  
and change like you

because this is the gift of  
repentance.

This just might save us.

Amen.

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## Further Reading

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Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Argument and Anger