

After the birth of their child, an Episcopal priest wearing his clerical collar visited his wife in the hospital. He greeted her with a hug and a kiss and gave her another hug and kiss when he left. Later, the wife's roommate commented, "Your pastor is a lot friendlier than mine!"

I really think that the scriptures are the most fascinating set of inspired and brilliant stories we can possibly ever read. They are truly amazing. But it is easy for us to miss the best parts. So we need to read a passage in its context. This is especially true in this week's gospel passage when the Jesus depicted is nothing like anything else in the New Testament.

Now the disciples learn best of all by experience. How many times have we read a scripture story, in which Jesus is teaching, and the disciples don't really 'get it.' What does He always do next? He creates a 'context' in which they can 'experience' the lesson first-hand, in person, and in living color. It's the most intense part of our learning as well. We 'do life' with the skinny Rabbi from Nazareth -- questioning, praying, learning, seeing through the interactions He has with others.

Understanding this makes this week's scripture story suddenly look very different from the way it has been typically interpreted. The usual interpretation is that Jesus is a biased Jewish man, and when approached by a Canaanite woman, first rejects her, but then she 'teaches Him a lesson' about grace, and He gives in, and heals her. But I read a new lens to view this reading today from theologian Lori Wagner. She points out that that interpretation just doesn't sound like the Jesus we know from every other story in scripture. And it actually makes no sense given the lesson Jesus just taught in the passage before this one.

Just before this, Jesus is in Jerusalem, surrounded by His disciples. He is teaching, when some Pharisees and Scribes come and begin challenging Him on the Jewish 'purity laws.' They accuse Jesus' disciples of breaking the traditions and not washing their hands. Jesus replies with a question: "Why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?" Or in our language: You Pharisees and Scribes are so caught up with your human-made rules (9) and the legalistic traditions that you keep demanding of people that you have forgotten how to be loving and kind toward others. You 'include' people by means of their heritage/pedigree and how well they obey your human-made rules rather than the state of their hearts and the strength of their faith in God.

Then comes the big statement that Jesus says to the entire crowd in rebuke of this: "Listen and understand. What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them." It doesn't matter what we eat. What matters is what emerges from our heart – the kindness we show, the openness we reveal, the inclusiveness we practice, the love we share with others.

Purity laws are laws created by a bureaucratic religious system for means of control. True faith only needs to follow God's law: Love God, and love others. These Jewish 'laws' were deeply ingrained into the minds of upright Jewish citizens. So when Jesus proclaims that these laws cannot be made the most important thing – they objected. Deeply ingrained religious thinking – even when it is wrong – is hard to change even for what is more correct or more true. Look at how many Catholics are on both sides of Church teaching on abortion and immigration. Jesus has a clear teaching based on Truth. The United States does not.

After telling His disciples to stop listening to the Pharisees and their teaching, Jesus reminds them that unwashed hands do not defile. A person's pedigree does not defile. A person's illness does not defile. A person's nationality does not defile. A person's food habits or cultural differences do not defile. The heart is what God cares about.

The disciples still don't quite get it. So....and this is very important to notice.....Jesus gets up and He leads His disciples out of Jerusalem north all the way into Gentile territory – into Tyre and Sidon, the land of the Canaanites – pagan territory – a place where a pious Jew never went. Here, we need to imagine the disciples in context, in living color, and watch for how the scene is played out.

Now, the disciples first had to be wondering what Jesus could be thinking. He's leading them deliberately into foreign territory. Why on earth is He doing that? The reader knows: The next situation is Jesus' prime 'teachable moment' stuff. Because the disciples were not 'getting' Jesus' teaching in words, He now will show them exactly what He means by showing them an experiential interaction that He has with a foreigner, a woman, a descendant of Jezebel, someone outside of Jewish law. In this interaction, He will clearly demonstrate that nothing about this woman's background, heritage, culture, or traditions matter. What matters is the amazing faith that comes from her heart – faith in Jesus and the ability to identify Him immediately as Lord, Messiah, Son, and Healer. But Jesus also knows, His disciples will not expect this, so He waits at first, and watches for their reactions. He needs them to react first, so that He can correct their point of view as the interaction unfolds.

The Canaanite woman approaches and cries out to Him -- clearly identifying Him as "Lord, Son of David" and pleading for mercy for her daughter, clearly believing that Jesus has the power to heal her, but Jesus responds first by not saying a word.

He watches for His disciples' reaction. He is silently saying, "Ok, what should we do here, students?"

They react, as He suspect they will. They shout, "Send her away! She's a Canaanite for goodness sake! She's not Jewish! She has no business with us! She's annoying! She is not following our laws! She keeps calling after us!"

So Jesus plays along and says to the woman: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." As we watch the scene unfold, we can almost see the disciples with smug, self-righteous smiles on their faces, nodding in agreement, feeling their Rabbi was doing the 'right thing' according to Jewish law.

She kneels before Him and asks for help. He speaks again, parroting what He knows His disciples believe: "It's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to dogs, is it?"

In great humility, she replies, "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Now Jesus replies to her saying, "Woman you have great faith!" "Your request is granted!" Her daughter was healed at that moment.

This would have shocked the tattered tunics right off the disciples' backs! What on earth was He doing? They thought He was acting like a proper Jewish elder. But Jesus promptly turned the tables on them and healed this woman. Not only that, He proclaimed that she had great faith – something He had never said to His own disciples!

Now, perhaps, they got it. And if they didn't then, they would now....because He proceeds after this to stay in that foreign territory and feeds 4000 men, women, and children, as He teaches them about God's mercy, grace, and love. We don't have that reading next week because it appears other places in the lectionary – but that's the further context in this gospel – Jesus feeds EVERYBODY – law-abiding or not.

As disciples we too have much to learn. But Jesus' 'teachable moments' – those times when He demonstrates with His own actions, love, and mercy what God is truly about – those are the moments that challenge us, change us, move us, and teach us still today.

In our world, we have our own kinds of written and unwritten 'rules' and 'traditions' and laws of how we think things 'ought' to be and what kinds of people are 'good enough' to be church members, American citizens -- acceptable, and lovable – you know – like us!

Jesus continues to challenge all of our assumptions, saying: human-made rules serve only you.

God's only concern is a person's heart – how we love God, and the way we love others.

This gospel is a challenge for us to read this story differently, to understand Jesus differently, to understand God differently, and to go out and live....differently. (adapted from Lori Wagner, "The Faith of the Canaanite Woman, in SERMON AND WORSHIP, SERMONS.COM)

Second of only 2 points! (I know that was a lot! – But it sheds a whole new light on this passage!) Our application of this gospel of course is the issue of immigration. What does the Bible tell us about foreigners among us? It's there in Exodus 22:21-24: "Do not molest or oppress them. I will hear their cry. I will hear them, says the Lord, for I am compassionate." We are to follow the example of God – not hide behind US law, just as we cannot hide behind US law about abortion being legal for some time and in some places. So this would include seeing immigrants with the eyes of God, who created each and every one of them – and every one of us. Though we can sometimes be dim or misshapen reflections of God, we are also precious in God's eyes – ALL of us, including the immigrant.

Now, this does not mean we need to agree with the immigrant, praise the undocumented alien's illegal border crossing. What we may not do in biblical and Christian justice is turn our backs on them, legislate against their children or refuse them medical care or sanctuary. Justice demands that we reach out to the stranger in trouble, the despised, the lonely, the unloved, the immigrant. Biblical justice means hospitality and caring and, when necessary, protection and defense of their rights.

In the 25th chapter of this gospel of Matthew, Jesus makes it clear that He proudly wears the disguise of the stranger and the poor in our midst. "As long as you did it to one of these least ones, you did it for me." And that's how we will be judged as fit or not for heaven. (adapted from Burghardt, JUSTICE: A GLOBAL ADVENTURE, pages not cited)

It would also be good for us to remember that the Christ Child was saved from the wrath of King Herod only because He and His family were able to cross a border. (Shelley Matthews, Commentary on Mt 2:13-23)