

Gleaning In The Fields Of Light

Bullets In The Backs Of Us All

By Ken Woodley

What a difficult story to swallow: Jesus has just gone to the district of Tyre and Sidon where he encounters a Canaanite woman who begs for mercy and the healing of her daughter.

Unusually, for him, Jesus says nothing, according to the Gospel of Matthew.

His silence is so disconcerting that the disciples grow irritated with the woman's continued pleas and ask Jesus to send her away.

What is more disturbing, however, is that Jesus seems to agree with them. When he finally does answer, he says this:

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

In other words, if your daughter cannot breathe because someone is kneeling on her neck, what is that to me? Bullets in the back? Sorry, man. You're in the wrong tribe.

The woman's anguished begging for Jesus to heal her daughter is—seemingly—dismissed outright because of who she is and where she lives.

There are several explanations for this uncharacteristic behavior by Jesus: He's simply exhausted. He's had a bad day. He's testing the understanding of his disciples or the faith of the woman.

The first explanation might be true but Jesus had to fully expect being approached by those seeking his blessing and healing. Especially because he was in an area he did not routinely visit.

If his silence and then grudging, seemingly cold-hearted reply are merely a test, it seems to me that the disciples fail but the Canaanite woman passes with flying colors.

“Lord, help me,” she persists, prompting another apparently callous response from Jesus:

“It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

The woman's test of faith—or the disciples'—got harder and harder, but she was up to the challenge, even if the disciples weren't.

Actually, I suspect Jesus knew the woman wasn't going to take 'No' for an answer. Nor, I believe, did Jesus want her to walk away without her child being healed.

If Jesus was waiting for one of the disciples to challenge his refusal because it ran contrary to his core teaching about loving your neighbor as yourself, Jesus was going to be disappointed. But the woman's response would not fill him with the least little bit of chagrin.

"Yes, Lord, but even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' tables," she boldly replies.

Jesus then proclaims her great faith and, just like that, the woman's daughter is healed.

One can only imagine the startled reaction of the disciples.

Contrary to their expectations, Jesus was telling them that this woman and her child are also God's children.

Just like George Floyd and Jacob Blake. Like you and me, with them.

The disciples clearly didn't think so. They had come into the region of Tyre and Sidon with stereotypes and prejudices firmly in place. They had looked at the woman and thought, "She's not one of us." She looked different. They had listened to her speak and thought, "She's not one of us." She spoke differently. Clearly, the disciples looked at her and listened to her and thought, "She's one of *them*."

Jesus directly challenged that point of view by the end of the Gospel lesson. But, in a real sense, Jesus is trying to get our attention, too.

We are all so blessed that God doesn't look into the world and divide people into "us" and "them."

Grace would not be grace if it came with premiums, restrictions based on race, membership guidelines on ethnicity and special zip codes for its delivery—you know, only to those who live on the right side of the tracks and in the best neighborhoods.

The truth is what Jesus taught: We are all children of God and there is a seat for all of us around the Lord's table.

Ultimately, if that woman and her child are dogs, then we are, too.

The knee is on your neck and mine. The bullets are in the backs of us all.

