

“An Alternative to Removing the Story from the Bible”

Matthew 15:21-28

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

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Most of us know that Thomas Jefferson was a Founding Father of this nation, a statesman and principal author of the Declaration of Independence, and the third president of the United States whose life still shapes hundreds of millions today. Some of us may also know he was a philosopher, an inventor and a tinkerer, and one of the philosophical things he tinkered with was the Bible.

Mr. Jefferson, as anyone who has ever lived in Virginia feels compelled to call him, believed in a higher power, a deity, God; and he believed Jesus was a wise teacher whose words and example were worth following; but he did not believe in the divinity of Jesus. So, he removed from his Bible all the stories about miracles, including the stories about resurrection and ascension. He did this for his own purposes, but eventually his thoughts were published, in two books, only one of which survives. It is commonly known as the *Jefferson Bible*.

We know, of course, that we can't do this with the Bible, though we might be tempted to, and in some ways almost do. We claim to embrace the whole Bible as the record of God's revelation to humankind, but we all have our canon within the canon, our Bible within the Bible — the texts we cling to and live by and those we avoid like the plague. We would never go so far as to cut pages out of the Bible, but if we were asked which stories, passages or books we might remove, given that privilege, most of us could provide an answer.

Martin Luther wanted to remove Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation from the Bible — too much emphasis on works and too little on grace. Many Christians talk as if they'd like to jettison the entire Old Testament — well, except for Psalms and a few Proverbs, maybe Ecclesiastes 3 and Job on some days. And on the other end of the spectrum, many have a favorite book, a defining book. It was said of a pastor in Durham some years ago that no matter which Gospel was

featured in the lectionary that day and year, he always preached out of Luke. Most of us have a favorite Gospel which shapes our Christology and theology, and most of us have a least favorite book or passage.

Many of us include today's reading from Matthew 15 in this latter category. I might ask for a show of hands if we were gathered together. It is a story that presents an image of Jesus that just doesn't seem to square with our image of Jesus which is informed by other passages of scripture. A woman comes to Jesus in need and he at first seems to ignore her, apparently because she is a Canaanite, and then he compares her to a dog, before finally praising her faith and healing her daughter.

This just doesn't seem like Jesus. He includes all people in his love. He responds with kindness and compassion to the wounded and weary. Who is this cranky, judgmental man? Scholars have offered all sorts of explanations for Jesus' behavior. Perhaps he is testing the woman. Perhaps Matthew is shaping his telling of the story for his Jewish readers. Or perhaps he is just tired. This seems like the most plausible explanation to me.

But none of these explanations changes the character of Jesus' behavior. He still seems callous, uncaring, almost mean-spirited, so unlike everything we know and believe about him. We're glad the woman's daughter is healed, but the happy ending doesn't make everything else acceptable. Can we remove this story?

On a certain level, I suppose we can, if not exactly like Thomas Jefferson, at least in terms of the significance this story has for us. But it will remain in the Bible, and because it will, we benefit from struggling with it a bit more. I'm not suggesting there is an easy answer, a key to understanding that makes Jesus look better. But I do believe there is value in addressing the discomfort this text stirs, and there is good news at the end not just for the woman and her daughter, but also for us.

As the story begins, Jesus and his disciples travel north to the region of Tyre and Sidon, beyond Galilee to Phoenicia, in other words, outside the sacred homeland. So, it should come as no surprise that they encounter someone from this strange land, a Canaanite woman. In Mark's version of this story, she is Greek, Syro-Phoenician by birth,

which is not the same thing. But in either case, she is clearly not Jewish. She is an outsider and a lowly woman, though in Matthew's lineage of Jesus, four women show up, which is unusual in and of itself, and three of these four women — Tamar, Rahab and Ruth — are Canaanite.

Perhaps this explains, at least in part, how the woman greets Jesus. "Have mercy on me, Lord, *Son of David*," she says. It is a messianic term. His own people have not recognized him in this way. And yet, this woman, this foreign woman, presumably not even a believer in God, does. "Have mercy on me," she says, "My daughter is tormented by a demon." How does Jesus respond to her request? He ignores her or at least he says nothing. He is silent.

It is an experience many women have had — simply not being heard. I remember when my mother testified for equal funding for women's sports in the Kentucky school system in the 1970s. As a college professor and former athlete, she was informed, passionate and articulate. My father also testified, though he did not say much, but the front-page story in the next day's *Courier Journal*, a fine paper, particularly in that time, talked extensively about the testimony of the eloquent George Chapman. Was that because he had an English accent, because he was a corporate executive or because he was a man? My mother, who said much more, was barely mentioned.

Women's voices just seem to get lost, and women of color have an even more difficult time getting heard. Austin Channing Brown, in her book *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* documents this reality in a number of ways, beginning with the peculiar origin of her name — Austin. Early on in life, she had a number of experiences where people were quite shocked when they met her. Seeing her name — Austin — they didn't expect a black woman. So, finally she asked her mother why she was given this name. It is a common name for a white man, she said, we hoped it might get you a first interview with people who might not consider a black woman.

It's a bit jolting because it is true. Whose voices do we consider? Which persons do we interview or favor? Women are used to being dismissed, especially women of color. But for Jesus to give this Canaanite woman the silent treatment is deeply troubling. The disciples

urge him to send the woman away. At least he doesn't do that. But in response to their request, he says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Really? I thought he came for all people.

It is possible that Matthew is shaping the story for his Jewish readers. Mark does not include this statement. Matthew's Jesus does not desert the Jewish people at any point. The Gospel is for all people, but as the Apostle Paul says to the church at Rome, by no means has God rejected the children of Israel (Romans 11:1–2). Throughout his writing, Matthew presents Jesus as a very Jewish messiah who fulfills prophetic hope, a new Moses, and here he says explicitly that he has come for the lost sheep of the house of Israel... yet *only* for them which does not square with his many efforts to include Gentiles in his love.

And if this isn't bad enough, the woman persists, kneeling before Jesus and saying, "Lord, help me," and he replies, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs?" What?! Is he calling her a dog? And not in an endearing way... She is an outsider, this seems to be the point, not worthy to receive his compassion. Yet still she persists, and in an astute way. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." It is an image that speaks to us, especially those who have young children and dogs. Food falls on the floor and thus children and dogs are bonded. The Pixar people at Disney World have made a film that highlights this reality in humorous fashion.

But this story is not humorous. The woman is in desperate need and Jesus seems unconcerned at best. Yet at this point in the story, perhaps because of the woman's persistence, perhaps because of her wit, Jesus finally says, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And Matthew tells us that her daughter is healed instantly. Great is your faith, he says — it is something he has not said to his disciples or the Pharisees. This female outsider has been given high praise. She recognizes Jesus as messiah and she is praised for her faith. She has been given the silent treatment and seemingly called a dog, but her daughter has been healed. So, all's well that ends well?

But in all seriousness, what do we make of this story? What is the message for us? There is value simply in addressing the discomfort we

experience reading it. It exposes important issues we still struggle with to this day — issues of gender, race, religion and culture. Our calling is to respect the dignity of all people and extend love to everyone, but we struggle just as much as Jesus seems to in this story.

We need to be careful, though, not to draw any conclusions about Jesus from this story. It's not clear how much of Matthew and how much of Jesus we are hearing in this text. It is still scripture, either way, we cannot throw it out, but we need to read this story in the context of the entire New Testament. And there are too many stories about Jesus showing compassion to outsiders to draw any conclusion other than that his concern includes all people.

So, perhaps we ought to focus on where the story ends and what this implies for us. Jesus does eventually affirm this woman for her character and faith in the boldest of ways, and sees that her daughter is made well. Our calling as his followers seems clear. No matter how much we may struggle to do so in some specific instances, our calling is to extend love and compassion to all people.

And no matter what conclusions we reach about Jesus here — whether there is some explanation we haven't identified or whether he really is struggling to extend the scope of his love — the fact that he struggles in this story is good news for us. It offers us encouragement. It tells us it is possible to struggle yet ultimately end in love. We often allow the presence of struggle to defeat us. We either can't seem to acknowledge that we don't extend love to some people or we think we have a right to openly reject them, and we give up.

In regard to this first challenge, we know all the sayings. *We are not racist... We respect women... We do our best to include people with physical, mental and emotional disabilities...* And yet, our actions often betray a different reality. We're not racist, but we assume the professional who is a person of color is probably not as sharp as the white professional. We respect women in many roles, but we don't want a woman pastor. We make room for everyone in the church, as long as they can walk up some steps, not make anyone feel uncomfortable, fit in with "normal" people. We will never grow in our capacity to love people who are different until we acknowledge our struggle to do so.

But it is a lot easier to acknowledge our struggle when we realize that everyone struggles, perhaps even Jesus, and it is possible move beyond struggle to love.

In regard to the second challenge, we also know the sayings. *We are not homophobic. We just don't want to condone "sin"... We don't have anything against Latino people and other immigrants. We just want them to come through legal channels, and not too many of them, because we can only take care of so many people... We don't hate Muslims. We just think we need to stand up for our faith. And aren't a lot of them terrorists?* There are people we exclude from our love quite openly without any hint of guilt because we feel like we have a right to exclude them. Why would we throw the children's food to the dogs?

And yet, Jesus ultimately tells this "dog" that her faith is great and he heals her daughter. Sometimes we mislabel people as sinner, illegal alien, terrorist, unbeliever... when in truth, however we regard any of these issues (and they are all more complex than we think!), their true identity is beloved children of God. Pastoral care pioneer Wayne Oates said he saw his task in counseling as helping people to remove the cheap price tags they place on themselves and asking their permission to bestow the price tag God our Heavenly Parent has placed on us with a love that is more than human love (*The Struggle to Be Free*, pp. 43-33).

It is a wonderful way of describing pastoral counseling. Sometimes we need to do something like this in the way we value other people. We need to remove the cheap price tag we have placed on them and allow God to place the real one. How do we do this? It requires a willingness to change, to see others in a different way. It requires an open heart and mind. And it requires more than us, it requires a willingness to allow the Spirit of God to work within us.

The text Charles Blanchard will sing and Jennifer Huggins will interpret though dance puts it this way. "Hearts open, minds awake, change us now for heaven's sake. Leave us not alone in hatred's wake. Show us how to love." It is a prayer for God's help as we seek to grow in our love. If we offer such a prayer from our heart, God will help us and we will grow.