
Stubborn Blessing

Matthew 15:10-28

I don't know if you've watched any of the hit TV show on Hulu, *The Bear*. It's a show where everyone needs therapy but instead decides to open a restaurant—A real fascinating watch, if you're looking to enter into the anxiety that is working in the kitchen of a fine-dining restaurant in Chicago called by the same name, *The Bear*. One thing I appreciate is how the show deals honestly and openly with mental health of its characters.

In the latest and last season of the show, one particular scene stands out. The front-of-house manager, Richie, has a full-on panic attack. He's fearful about the restaurant's precarious future, with all its mounting financial problems. He's worried with regard to his own sense of responsibility, thinking about the employment of his staff and friends. He's also afraid of losing his sense of identity if the restaurant goes under, having fought so hard through his own personal trauma to gain all he has. All of that, and with the stress and exhaustion of the job itself, Richie begins to spin out. And in that moment, he starts naming items that he can touch and see in the room: menu, chair, door, clock, desk . . .

This is what mental health experts call a cognitive grounding technique. Maybe you have first-hand experience with this. That in a moment of overwhelming fear, the naming of physical objects forces a person's attention out of their spiraling *internal* narrative and back into the present moment. This labeling of things in very concrete ways causes the brain to shift processing power from the amygdala—the hyperactive, fearful emotional center—to the prefrontal cortex, the rational, logical thinking center. It anchors the person in an awareness of the safe, external present moment.

Reality can be messy sometimes, even fear-inducing. In the throws of all we can't control or in the face of the unknown, we have a human tendency to label things. It's how we make our world manageable. We categorize things in deciding what is safe and what is dangerous, what belongs and what doesn't. Sometimes this labeling helps ground us in reality. But other times it does just the opposite: It doesn't ground us but causes us to miss reality altogether—because we mistake our labels for reality itself.

Have you ever met someone and immediately decided what kind of person they were:

You see the bumper sticker.

You hear the accent.

You notice the style of clothes.

You hear the job.

You learn where they live.

You discover what church they attend—or don't attend.

And suddenly you've created a little file folder in your mind about them, from such little and perhaps misleading information. And you think you have them all pegged down, until months later they do something that defies the label? Then it's time to scrap the folder and start a new one. Or better, just leave it empty and open.

Theologian Paul Tillich talks about how, even though it is the character of human life, we have a problem with *ambiguity*. We'd rather label than leave ourselves subject to the unknown. Think about a small child who calls the scary, mysterious noise, a *monster*. It may not help the fear necessarily, but now it has a name, a category; It is a *thing* to be managed and avoided. It is far more scary, the idea of an unknown threat.

Today's Gospel story gives us a most-troubling picture of Jesus. It's possibly the hardest imagine of Jesus to reconcile. We're used to the Jesus who always gives the benefit of the doubt . . . the Jesus who doesn't give credence to human labels, but looks to shatter them in all situations. And yet, in this, he seems to be bound by his assumptions, even his religion. The text in Matthew chapter 15 is left a bit ambiguous for us to make sense of, and maybe that's the point.

Jesus encounters a woman from outside his community—a Canaanite woman. Matthew is very intentional about telling us this. She is not simply another person who happens to need healing. This one is an outsider.

She is from the wrong people.

She is from the wrong religious tradition.

She is outside the boundaries of the community Jesus has come to serve.

But she makes her voice heard: “Have mercy on me, Lord,” pleading on behalf of her sick daughter, who is tormented by an evil spirit. In Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* translation of the text, it flat-out says that Jesus ignores her—like a rock star who can’t be bothered with yet another fan who is fanning-out. The disciples who are with him don’t mince words, they want her sent away immediately. And Jesus says something that is difficult to hear: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” She was not of that house. And a boundary is drawn. A limit is made clear in the mission. A limit to who belongs within the scope of Jesus’s work.

Nevertheless she persisted. In the tradition of so many strong women who refuse to accept the voice of the patriarchy. Those like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Dorothy Day, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Fannie Lou Hamer, Marie Curie. The pleading mother required a stubborn blessing, and wasn’t going to just accept the way things were. She boldly comes closer and kneels before Jesus. “Lord, help me.” And he responds with the image of a household where the children are fed first, saying that it isn’t right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.

It is one of those moments in Scripture that makes us uncomfortable—and perhaps it should. Is Jesus labeling and dismissing her based on her family and where she lives? Does faith make room to reconcile a Jesus who may not already know exactly what needs to happen in every encounter? Here, Jesus encounters someone whose persistence forces the conversation to become larger. That’s usually his role. The woman turns Jesus’s own words around, and says: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Jesus changes his tone: “Woman, great is your faith.”

Now, we cannot understate the persistence of this woman who appears to change the mind of Jesus. I also wonder if Jesus is here taking one for the team. Perhaps he overheard the grumbling of the disciples who have already

determined to dismiss her in the name of the mission. Does Jesus make himself an object lesson for how to be adaptable and overcome labeling?

It makes me think about how in Mark chapter 8—the only time this happens in all the Gospels—it takes Jesus two tries to heal a man. At first, you wonder why Jesus's ability to heal the blind man in Bethsaida seemed so impotent. In a first attempt, Jesus spits on the man's eyes and lays hands on him—and can we say, "Thank God for modern medicine?!"—but it doesn't work all the way. The man's vision is still very blurry, seeing people looking like "trees walking around." It takes Jesus a second attempt to touch his eyes before he is completely healed.

Scholars will point out how Jesus uses this act as an object lesson for the spiritual blindness of the disciples who were looking on. In essence, Jesus was saying, "Watch this. This is kind of how you are..." and proceeds to fumble through the act. The disciples only partially recognized who Jesus was (like seeing men as trees). They needed a second corrective, a clearer vision themselves. And right after this, Peter correctly confesses Jesus as the Messiah.

If Jesus makes himself an object lesson for this woman's stubborn blessing, then what is the lesson? If I can borrow language that pertains to our time, it appears the disciples were still unable to learn the difference between what is a welcoming church and a church of radical welcome. You see, their welcoming mission was open, but it still had a structure, a hierarchy. Insiders and outsiders are still clearly defined. Their church sign may read: "All were welcome," but within the confines of a certain expectation. Others could come and be fed, but only by the scraps of the ones who do the welcoming.

Radical welcome expands the table, expands the mission, and makes those on the inside adaptable to be changed by the ones you are welcoming. You see, that's the difference. Because in this story, the outsider doesn't simply receive something from Jesus; The outsider moves closer and teaches something critical to the teacher, and draws the circle even wider.

That takes humility. It means being able to say: "We don't know everything." It means being able to say: "We have a history, but our history doesn't tell us everything about our future." It means being able to say: "We have traditions that matter deeply to us, but our traditions are not God."

It means being willing to ask: “What might we need to learn?” And perhaps even more difficult: “What might we need to unlearn?” Because adaptability isn't simply a strategy. It is a spiritual discipline. And if I can state the obvious: If Jesus can adapt and change, then we can too. One biblical scholar speaking about this text makes the point that perhaps what makes Jesus “perfect” is not that he has no flaws but that he is growing, and himself becoming. He is perfectly able to adjust in the moment and change.

What will we do with the unknown—Us as a church, us as individuals? Undoubtedly, we will have to give it a name when we encounter it. We are quite uncomfortable with ambiguity. We may even have some monsters that need to be called out. We will need to categorize things and give it a label. And those may serve us for a time. They just might help ground us in reality. But the Jesus-Way is always to make ourselves adaptable.

I think one of the most faithful things we can say about ourselves is:

We are still becoming. We are not finished.

There is still more becoming to do.

There are still people we have not met.

There are still stories we have not heard.

There are still ways God will surprise us.

There are still boundaries God will ask us to cross.

There is still bread on the table.

And there is still room for another surprising guest.

Amen.