

*How Embarrassing*

Matthew 15:21-28

Whitefish UMC

August 17, 2008

- † Have you ever gathered with family and friends around a table for a special meal in which everything seemed to be going so well until...someone at the table said something really embarrassing?
- † It happened for us on a beautiful summer evening a couple of weeks ago as we shared a meal with our son's relatively new girlfriend and her extended family. Now even though they have been dating seriously for only six months, Carey and Sam seem perfect for each other. Sam's family loves Carey; we love Sam.
- † Of course our respective families secretly hope that this relationship will evolve into something more than just boyfriend/girlfriend. Carey and Sam are thirty-two for heaven's sake, and most of their friends are married. But we're all trying hard not to put too much pressure on them.
- † Sam just celebrated her birthday and was telling everyone about how special it had been. She told of how Carey had planned a scavenger hunt for her, with treasure maps made out of paper burned around the edges to look like a pirate's clue.
- † "What did you find at the end of the hunt?" I asked. Sam joyfully replied, "Oh, the most wonderful lightweight frame for my raft—I've been wanting one!" "Great!" I replied, thinking, "Well that's an interesting gift...."

- † But Sam’s grandmother, a “real pistol” of a lady who is in her nineties and says pretty much whatever she thinks, retorted: “Aw honey, I was hoping it was a ring!”
- † Poor Sam blushed mightily and buried her head in her hands. Carey blushed, too. No one knew what to say after that, and an uncomfortable silence lingered for a little too long.
- † Each of us has had embarrassing stories told about us or by us around the family table. It’s part of the human condition. But it’s one thing to live with embarrassing stories told within the confines of our own family.
- † It’s another thing to have them shared beyond your family circle. Which makes it even more remarkable when it happens that such an embarrassing story should make it into the biblical record.
- † Who would have thought that a story like the one that we just read, which puts Jesus in a less than flattering light, would be included in the biblical canon by not just one but two gospel writers?
- † It’s so unusual that those who circulated the stories of Jesus, at first only by word of mouth, must have said something like: “Can you believe what happened when Jesus met that woman of Cana, and she had the insolence to argue with him even after he told her to go away?”
- † Thankfully, the story was remembered and included in the gospels so that we can hear it and learn from it. But first it’s important to understand its context.
- † Jesus and his disciples have left the region of Galilee and headed north and west toward the region of Tyre and Sidon (now southern

- Lebanon). Tyre was the Roman port city—the gateway for trade to Damascus, Baghdad and beyond.
- † This is foreign territory—where people worship strange gods and the ritual laws of cleanliness are unknown. Jesus and his friends don't belong here—the people who live here are Gentiles—outside the pale of acceptability for an observant Jew like Jesus.
  - † We aren't sure why Jesus and his friends ventured on this journey. In Mark's version, Jesus has gone to escape the demands of the people. Matthew leaves this motivation out, but it makes sense.
  - † Remember that Jesus has just come from Nazareth, his own hometown, where his friends and family have doubted his authority and taken offense at his teaching. He's still grieving over the death of his cousin, John the Baptizer. And when he tried to get away at that point, the crowds followed him, and he fed them all with five loaves and two fishes.
  - † Then there was the storm at sea and Peter's desire to cross the water, defeated by fear and doubt. "Everywhere Jesus turns he finds need—need and people who want what he can do for them but who remain blind to who he is. He is at the frayed end of his rope, and all but used up." (Taylor)
  - † Then along comes this "real pistol of a lady—only she probably wouldn't have been granted the designation "lady--" crying out to Jesus to heal her daughter. She is persistent, desperate, a screamer. She won't take no for an answer.
  - † But wait a minute. How ironic that it is she, a woman without a man, an outsider, an "untouchable" person—who calls him by name, "O

- Lord, Son of David.” This is the title reserved for the Messiah, the title his own people have withheld from him.
- † It’s as if a trick is being played on him. So that must be why he is so cruel to her, at least at first. He doesn’t even acknowledge her, and when she persists, pleading, “Have mercy on me,” his disciples tell him to send her away.
  - † Before we judge them too quickly, remember that the Jews had survived for centuries by maintaining boundaries between themselves and outsiders. Jesus, they must have thought, was in enough trouble already and liable for more scorn if he associated with this strange woman.
  - † Not to be deterred, she calls out in great desperation, “Lord, help me.” And for Jesus, this is the straw that breaks the proverbial camel’s back. Being human, he’s had enough of people asking for what they need and want—not for what he longs for, which is participation in bringing on the kingdom of God.
  - † And up until now, that kingdom has been reserved for the Jews. The problem is, most of them don’t want to accept it or be a part of it. So Jesus calls her a dog—a cruel insult if there ever was one—reminding her that he has come for the Jews, not the dogs.
  - † But the woman turns Jesus’ words inside out. She turns his own metaphor back on him. She turns an insult into an opportunity. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters’ table.”
  - † As Cynthia Campbell notes, “Jesus, the master of metaphor, the champion of debate with the most educated religious leaders, is shown up by an outsider, by a mother so desperate to save her child that she

does not let an insult get in the way but turns it into an opportunity to lay claim to the mercy of God.”

- † Yes, it’s an embarrassing story—embarrassing especially for the leaders of the synagogues who were male and Jewish and didn’t like seeing the Teacher bested by a strange woman. It’s amazing that it was remembered and written down.
- † I love the idea that it did make it into the written record because it was Jesus himself who learned from it and wanted to pass it on. What Jesus learned was that the grace of God was wider than he had originally thought.
- † And that’s a lesson from which we can all benefit.
- † When I hear this Bible story, I can’t help but think of the wonderful, quirky film, “Lars and the Real Girl,” which we rented not too long ago. Lars Lindstrom is a pathologically shy young man who spends his days either at work or in a small apartment attached to the garage of his brother’s house.
- † On Sundays he can attend the local church where he tried as best as any deeply introverted person can to become an active part of the community. His only comfort in life is a powder blue blanket his mother knit for him while he was still in her womb.
- † Lars never got to meet his mother, since she died at his birth. His grieving and emotionally distant father raised him, which left him afraid of the touch of another human being. A friend’s hand on his shoulder can send him into deepest agony.
- † It’s understandable, then, when Lars turns to the internet to address his loneliness by ordering for himself a “fully functional” and life-like

doll named Bianca. He immediately introduces her to his brother and sister-in-law, and eventually the whole town, as his girlfriend.

- † Soon he is wheeling Bianca around town in a wheelchair (to which she has been confined since her birth, he explains) and chatting with her about his childhood memories and his most intimate dreams. His connection to Bianca grows and grows, which would be great, if it weren't for the "doll thing."
- † "But here is where the Kingdom of God enters the picture. Were this one of those 'realistic' films, we would at this point be treated to a kind of medical who-done-it where doctors chase down the patient's affliction and dismantle it piece by piece.
- † Or we might see the derelict loner descend into a kind of delusional pathology that eventually manifests itself in mass murder. In any case, Lars would more than likely be portrayed as an abhorrent 'other' upon whom all of our irrational fears and regrettable animosities could so easily be placed." (Seeds of Shalom)
- † But the movie is less about Lars than it is about his community, a town that over the last 27 years has adopted him as its own. Lars is blessed with an extended family that decides—beyond reason and despite fear—to bear with him, come what may.
- † The community eventually accepts his delusion and arrives at a refreshing and not so frightening reality of its own. At one point, Lars' pastor comments that Lars' fishnet-clad companion "has become one of us. She is our teacher. She loves this town, and most of all she loves Lars."
- † How odd, really. A blow-up life-size doll becomes a teacher. Outrageous, isn't it? Almost as outrageous as an unnamed Canaanite

woman becoming the teacher of the Messiah, the one who others called “Teacher.”

- † As Jesus changed his mind, brought to his senses by someone who everyone else rejected, did he remember the scripture from Isaiah 56:1, 7-8:

*Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed...And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord...these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.”*

- † I like to think so. This embarrassing story of his encounter with the Canaanite woman must have impressed Jesus and changed him deeply. From then on he speaks of loving your enemies, tells a parable about a persistent woman begging an unjust judge for mercy, and offers his good news for everyone.

- † And as for “Lars and the Real Girl....” I admit that I love the film in part because it’s one of a very few that portrays a pastor and church in a favorable light. You see Lars has anticipated that because of the hand he has been dealt in life he will have to endure a dismal existence devoid of the one thing he both craves and fears—human touch.

- † Nearly three decades of being emotionally excluded by his father, and then by his brother, have left him with little choice but to find solace in a world of his own making. How easily his life might have been

lost had it not been for the realization on the part of his church that they had a central role to play in suffering along with one of their own in order to keep him from slipping away from them entirely.

- † Yes, one could say about the film and the story of the Canaanite woman, “How embarrassing!” But these embarrassing stories have a way of teaching us how to really pay attention, to listen in love, to each other, and finally to offer ourselves in the healing of the world.
- † May we, like Jesus, remember our true selves, and open our hearts and our arms in embarrassing, extravagant compassion. Amen.

Sources:

Barbara Brown Taylor, “Crossing the Line,” *Seeds of Heaven*. 2004

Cynthia Campbell, “Crumbs,” <http://fourthchurch.org>

“Gathering Others,” [www.seedsofshalom.com](http://www.seedsofshalom.com)