

“Beyond the ‘Bondage of Self’” by Michele Frome

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Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

As most of you know, I am engaged in clinical pastoral education – this is basically on-the-job training to become a chaplain, a person who provides pastoral care. At the end of this month, I’ll be eligible to seek certification as a clinical chaplain. I’m indebted many people at Seekers Church for helping to make this happen, but especially to the Mission Support Group for providing me with financial support from the Growing Edge Fund. Thank you, all, for your ongoing support.

Part of my clinical work has been at the Hebrew Home, a large Jewish nursing home in Rockville. As part of my training there, I was required to plan and lead a group activity. One of the Christian residents there urged me to lead a Christian Bible Study class.

Well, I’m no Bible scholar, but I didn’t have a better idea

for a group activity, so I started a Bible Study class in January 2015, intending to do it for 4 months. Well, I'm still doing it. We're studying the Gospel of Matthew, discussing a passage of about 8-12 verses each week. In order to bring the passage alive for the members of the class, I have to bring it alive for myself first! Sometimes I'm working with familiar passages, but usually I'm struggling to make sense of the material for the first time.

In March, we came to the passage about Jesus healing the Canaanite woman's daughter. It's a simple story about a woman's faith that Jesus can heal her daughter. However, we'd just had several classes focused on faith, so I wanted to focus on something else.

In this story, Jesus travels into Gentile territory. A woman identified as a Canaanite, a Gentile, seeks him out and starts shouting, "Have mercy on me, Son of David...my daughter is possessed by a demon...please help her." Jesus doesn't respond. She keeps shouting. Finally, the disciples urge Jesus to deal with her so she'll go away. Jesus says to the woman, "I was sent only to the Jews. It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Whoa! Wait a minute. I thought Jesus was sent to save all people. And referring to Gentiles as "dogs" – that sounds really racist to me.

Now, it's possible to explain this apparent insult. Jesus frequently tested people to prove their intentions. He's just testing the Canaanite woman by telling her she has no reason to expect his help. He used a metaphor – a father feeding his children before he feeds the pets – to illustrate that his first priority is to minister to the Israelites.

It's true that in Jesus' time Jews sometimes referred to Gentiles as "dogs," but if you look at the original Greek you'll see that these are two different words. The word the

Jews used to refer to Gentiles means a “wild cur,” an unclean animal. But the word Jesus used means “small dog” or “pet dog.” He wasn’t using a racial slur – he was just making a point and testing the woman’s faith.

But I want to focus on the woman.

Regardless of what Jesus intended, I’m sure she heard his words as a put-down, if not a full-fledged insult. So what does she do?

- She doesn’t retaliate by attacking Jesus or insulting Jews,
- she doesn’t complain about being disrespected,
- she doesn’t post a rant on Facebook,
- she doesn’t creep away in shame,
- she doesn’t even get angry.

Instead, she accepts what Jesus said, and responds using the same imagery: ““Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

Here’s a quiz: When the woman said that, was she thinking of herself as inferior to Jesus, superior to Jesus, or equal to Jesus? What do you think?

(Some people said “inferior”, and some people said “equal.”)

This was actually a trick question. When the Canaanite woman spoke, she wasn’t thinking of herself at all – she was thinking only about her daughter.

In my class at the nursing home, we discussed the Canaanite woman as an example of humility. We talked about the difference between humility and humiliation – humiliation is when something causes us to feel embarrassed or ashamed, but humility is when we realistically accept our own limits.

But I think there’s more to the Canaanite woman than this. For me, this story illustrates another level of humility. The

best description I have for it is a quote, often attributed to CS Lewis but actually written by Rick Warren: "True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less."

For me, this story is about self-less-ness. In my own life, I first encountered the concept of self-less-ness in the third step prayer of Alcoholics Anonymous. AA's third step states that we "made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God." And the AA suggested third step prayer begins like this: "God, I offer myself to Thee—to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will."

"Relieve me of the bondage of self." That's sort of like the question, "have you stopped beating your wife" – if I ask God to relieve me of the bondage of self, I am admitting that I am trapped by my self, and I want to be freed from it.

In March of this year, I delivered a sermon entitled, "I am Enough". In that sermon I talked about my inner drive to try to do more and more, and the wisdom of accepting that I am enough.

Now, the story of the Canaanite woman and the third step prayer are challenging me to go even further – to not even think about whether I'm enough. To not think about myself. Is thinking about myself wrong?

I'm starting to find an answer in the writings of Richard Rohr. In his book, *Falling Upward*, Rohr has written about the two phases of our lives. In the first phase, we are focused on establishing our identity. This is important work – we need boundaries, order, and an ego structure. But this isn't our life, it's merely the "container" for our life. In the second phase of life, we find the contents that our container is meant to hold.

Moving from the first phase to the second phase involves moving out of our comfort zone and encountering trials and tribulations. We suffer. As a result of this suffering, we may experience an inner change in how we see ourselves, the world, and the divine. We come to understand ourselves as a very small piece of something much, much bigger – Richard Rohr and others call this our “True Self.” The ego no longer needs to fight for itself; it can relax.

I recently got an insight from one of my houseplants, a Shamrock plant. When I’m ego-centered, I see myself like the plant, and I seek out all the fertilizer, sunlight, and water I need to make sure I’m lush and healthy. But my True Self realizes that I’m not the plant, I’m just one of the many branches of the plant. When that branch dies or is broken, the plant goes on living and producing. (My Shamrock plant belonged to my mother for many many years, until she died 14 years ago.)

As it turns out, the work of finding my True Self is essential for me in order to be an effective chaplain. Here’s why:

The essence of being a chaplain is listening, really listening, to the other person. I’ve learned in my training that we’re all prone to be lousy listeners: when the other person is talking, we’re thinking about our own experiences, our own ideas, our own subliminal feelings that triggered by the other person’s narrative. We can’t help it.

The key to being an effective chaplain is to identify the thoughts and feelings that are mine, and set them aside. When I’m living out of my True Self, released from the bondage of self, this becomes a lot easier – I’m better able to focus on others.

So, the Canaanite woman has become my new role model. She was focused on helping someone else. Her ego wasn’t bruised, she didn’t sacrifice her pride, she didn’t care what other people

thought of her. Why not? Because her ego and her status were not important. She had made the journey beyond the bondage of self.

Amen.