



## The Outsiders - Richard Coble

Have you ever felt like you were on the outside, looking in? On the margins; stuck on the sidelines as the game plays on; a pariah to the cool kids; not invited to the party; ignored at promotion time; or even not getting a call back from the interview? Aunt Gladdis didn't invite me to the family reunion. My son Bruce never calls any more. Susan doesn't talk about her day when she get's home. Have you ever felt like you were on the outside?

I have. Sometimes it feels like I have spent a lifetime feeling that way. Not invited. On the outside. On the sidelines. It feels that way, even when feelings don't match facts. You can be on the inside, in the boardroom, with the family, in the clique but then something small, or something big, can happen: your friends forget to call, you get that diagnosis, you lose someone, you didn't get the job, and bam. Its everything. When you came in today, did you feel like you belonged? Do you always feel that way? Where do you struggle to belong?

Let's contextualize it just a bit. In just a few professional years, I've witnessed how this feeling of inside or outside has a lot to do with how we're treated, and how we treat others. Sometimes, oftentimes, it is based on how you look, who you are. I worked as a hospital chaplain for many years before coming to Grace Covenant. I can't tell you how many times I walked into a patient's room, this young man, this young white man, some might say this dashing young man, in a suit and tie, walking right into a hospital room, and the patient or the family member would start off before I could begin the conversation: 'Oh, Doctor, thank goodness you're here. Wait, no? I'm sorry; I thought you were the doctor. You look like a doctor, chaplain.' Do people ever make you feel like an insider because of how you look? I told that story to my students at Wake Forest last year. One of my black students, a man in his 50s,

who had already spent a career in the ministry, said that when he walked down the hallways of hospitals, also in a suit, no one ever called him doctor. Sometimes he got suspicious looks, or anxious questions. Do people make you feel like an outsider because of how you look?

We read in our passage today about someone made to feel like she doesn't belong. A woman, a *woman*, a Canaanite, thus a Gentile from the region surrounding Gentile cities, a rural person, shouts at Jesus, "Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." And Jesus, exhausted from arguing with the Pharisees a few verses back, answers, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." "Lord, help me," she pleads. And Jesus, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." And your heart just sinks. I can't read that verse without feeling it, feeling a weight in my chest. It's just (sigh). "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

So, the story goes, the woman responds, not flinching at Jesus's rebuke, moving forward in faith: "Yes. Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." And Jesus is amazed at her persistence. "Great is your faith!" Her daughter is healed.

How does that make you feel? How do you feel when you read this passage? Confused? Angry? Numb? Do you feel the feelings of the outside? This passage turns our expectations around in the worst way, doesn't it? This Jesus, who cured the servant of a Centurion, also a Gentile, a Gentile man, only a few chapters ago; Jesus, who in the final chapters of the Gospel gives that Great Commission: "Make disciples of all nations"; "all nations"; Jesus, who spends the entirety of the Gospel arguing with the religious authorities of his own nation, calling them hypocrites, saying that they have stripped their religion of its core of justice, mercy, and faith; This Jesus, the savior that Matthew reveals to us, who exemplifies a life of generosity, faithfulness, and care, this Jesus calls a Gentile woman a dog and refuses to heal her daughter. I

come to this passage, and I'm lost within it. Where is its Gospel? Where is its redemption? I search but cannot recognize the Jesus of Matthew 15.

There are ways to explain this passage. Maybe, say some scholars, it was originally a tale that left out the second half, the woman's witty comeback and the healing all together. Maybe it was originally an oral tradition popular with Jewish-Christians. These Christians argued against expanding the Jesus movement on to the Gentiles, and they had this story about Jesus rejecting a Canaanite to back up their argument. And then, maybe, the author of Matthew, who many believe was himself a Jewish-Christian writing for a community made up of both Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus, maybe Matthew flipped the story on its head, showing Jesus accept, even praise this Gentile who, who showed him such great faith!

Or maybe, the text reflects a theology held by the gospel writers. This theology said that Jesus's ministry was first to the Jews and then expanded following his death to the Gentiles. The woman is correct then to come to Jesus, but she's just a little too early. Give me another 13 chapters, Jesus is telling her, wait until the great commission. Right now, my mission is first with my people. My disciples will carry it out past here, but you wait your turn.

To be honest, after reading the commentaries, after placing this passage in conversation with the rest of the text, I'm sorry, I still feel outside of it. These explanations just create more distance. They historicize it; they systematize it. They don't reveal the gospel, the salvation in it; I still have difficulty seeing gospel here. Faith, yes I see. Faith willing to speak back to a wall thrown up at it, yes I see that. Faith is here. But I guess I'm looking for something else, a Jesus who responds differently.

So have you ever felt like an outsider? Do you feel like one now?

When I read this story, I can't help but remember my first encounter with it. I didn't hear it, or at least it didn't register until I was about 19 years old, sitting in a dorm room in Chapel Hill, taking an Introduction to the New Testament. That was a rough spring. I lost my faith that Spring, as college students sometimes do. Raised a bible believing Baptist, bright eyed, with eyes sights set on the ministry, I took a class on the Bible, and not just any class, no. The introduction to the new testament by Dr. Bart Ehrman, a giant in the field of New Testament studies, a graduate of the seminary I wanted to go to, a charismatic and kind and passionate teacher, who himself had lost his own faith years ago, and who wanted to share with his students all the complexities, the politics, the contradictions, the imprecisions of the biblical text. So I took up his challenge. I read my New Testament that spring cover to cover. I got to this passage, and some other passages like it and I just sank. I remember one cool March afternoon, a friend and I met Prof. Ehrman at a local restaurant, and among other things, I remember, I asked him, I said to him: "I came upon this passage, this one where Jesus calls a woman a dog because she was not an Israelite. I don't remember that story ever being read in church. What's up with that?" "Yea, they don't talk much about that one," my teacher replied. (laugh).

I felt like an outsider then. On the outside of the faith, looking in, confused, maybe angry, probably sad, looking for answers. There's a long story of how I came back to faith, the experiences of the church that followed, that brought me back to loving and challenging communities like this one. I am thankful for my faith, but I don't want to dwell there right now. I want to stay here, in this passage, this feeling this passage presents to us, this being on the outside, looking in. Let's sit with that. Let's not move on to answers. Let's forget the commentaries for a minute. Let's just sit here, in the confusion that this text brings. Let's just dwell here for a minute on the outside. Have you ever felt like you were on the outside?

You see, its unusual for me to feel like an outsider, I'll readily admit this. White, male, Christian, married to a woman, now a Presbyterian minister, now with a doctorate, now with a child, people see me and they smile. It's a good feeling, I won't lie. The times I felt outside, the times I have been sidelined, the setbacks of life, they have come, they will come. They come for us all. Maybe you feel the same way. We made it here this morning after all; we're all insiders, to some extent, more or less. Do you feel a strange mixture of inside and outside?

For people on the inside, for people like me, who can sit in these pews, for people who feel spoken to by the gospel, who feel challenged by the gospel, who feel comforted and encouraged and loved by the gospel, it is nonetheless good to hear passages like this, to feel uncomfortable, to dwell in discomfort with our bible for just a minute.

Because, we know, there are those who feel rejected by this book. There are those who have been rejected by preachers and congregations and missionaries holding this book and saying you don't fit in here. Our gospel is not for you. Not for your kind. Our gospel, our, us, the inside, looking out, sometimes extending a hand to the outside, but not inviting them in, making clean distinctions, keeping that border high, making sure those others know they are other, that they are out.

There are those who have been hurt by the church, who have felt the gospel used as a weapon, who have had the book thrown at them, figuratively and literally. I don't need to tell some of you about this reality. Some of you have had the book thrown at you.

This passage is a reminder to us of that feeling of outside. Or better, it blurs that distinction, that border we draw between those inside and those outside. It reminds us that we all come to God, we all come to God's community, at one time or another, feeling lost, or feeling confused, or feeling ostracized, rejected, punished, feeling like a stranger. And some are made to

feel that way more than others, we know it; we saw it on display last weekend in Charlottesville, the awful chants, and flags, and salutes of white supremacy, the equivocation of our leaders.

(pause) If this passage can make us uncomfortable for a moment, if it can jar us for a moment, if it can remind us of that feeling of being on the outside, looking in, of not knowing, of not having the answers, if it can put us, however partially, into the place of this Canaanite woman, maybe next time, we will better hear, we will remember to stop and listen, we can empathize for just a little bit, with those we come across not sure if they belong, not sure if they can believe, feeling outside, feeling wounded, feeling like they don't fit.

Isn't it funny, though, this Canaanite woman's faith. Even in the midst of rejection, it's a lesson in persistence. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table"; "Woman, great is your faith!" If there is gospel in this story, if there is redemption, it is there, in that faith. A faith that persists, that keeps banging on the door. Despite insult and injury, it keeps knocking on that closed door.

It tells us that God nonetheless pulls at us, nonetheless calls to us, inspires us to call to God, even in the midst of woundedness, even in the midst of rejection. It doesn't excuse the rejection, it doesn't erase it, the woman's faith doesn't make this passage any easier. But faith is here, nonetheless. 'Nonetheless' is a good word for it. The woman knows Jesus can heal her daughter, none-the-less after he rejects her. There is something about Jesus that calls to this woman, that draws her to him, that draws her to the people of God, even when the disciples, the people of God, even when Jesus himself tells her the contrary. There is a pull there. There is a calling, a thing that brings us back, that brings us to something true, something real, despite the rejection. People will come to us, or will be drawn to our community, or they will call out for justice, even when they have been rejected, in fact, even when the church has rejected them. We

can learn from them. They will teach us much about ourselves, about our God, our God who speaks to them, nonetheless.

I have a friend who once was made to feel on the outside of the faith. Coming out as a lesbian while still a young woman at an evangelical college, she was pushed out of a doctoral program in just her first semester. She had to leave her church, her denomination. It took many years, it is still taking many years, for her to find her way back to church, to find places that she can trust, after, in a time of great vulnerability, she was rejected; she was thrown out. But I can tell you, as she was locking arms with fellow clergy members in Charlottesville last weekend, as she stood up against the forces and violence of white supremacy last weekend, as she walked the streets with stoles around her shoulders, arm and arm with sisters and brothers in Christ, she felt that pull, the call of God, despite, even in the midst of rejection.

This passage, this week, this moment, it all brings us closer to the outside. Let's listen to it; let's learn from it; let's learn how to be the community of God to and with those who have been pushed to the outside for much, much longer. Let's bear one another's wounds, one another's doubts, one another's feelings more patiently. Let's bear our own more patiently, more gracefully. Let's care for each other, while keeping an ear out for that call, that pull, that thing that brings us back to God, to God's community, that keeps pulling us back. Have you ever felt like an outsider, looking in? The outside has much to teach us. This woman, this outsider, has much to teach us; look, she's right there, in our Scripture, nonetheless.