

The Rev. Kate Byrd  
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### Table Manners

One of my favorite things as a parent is getting to read books with my kids, especially when they are gifts from friends. Last Christmas, our dear neighbors, the Johnson's shared this book with us, about a dog named Love and Love's impact on her owner Emma as she enters school. And today as we honor our students and teachers, as well as all of you who are supporting them through these backpacks and supplies, I thought I would share a bit of the story with you. The book is entitled "Growing Up with Love" and begins with a little girl named Emma being tucked into bed by Mom and Dad. Before saying goodnight Emma's parents lean in close and ask her, "Well, what's his name?" As Emma grasps a small little white and brown spotted dog she smiles and responds, "Love." Four year old Emma, and her puppy Love quickly become the best of friends, playing, bonding, and growing together. But, as time passes Emma soon has to leave Love and begin Kindergarten.

One day while at school Emma's teacher introduces a new girl to the class, as we read in our book... the teacher "smiled and said, 'Her name is Bea,' and all the children laughed. They didn't like the clothes she wore. They didn't like her hair. They knew that she was all alone, but didn't even care!" (TURN PAGE) "They laughed at her. They picked on her. They called her ugly names. They left her out of everything and made her feel to blame." (TURN PAGE) "But Emma knew it wasn't right. It made her feel like hiding. When she got home, Love wagged his tail, but Emma started crying. And everytime a tear would drop, Love would wipe it dry. No matter what she said or did, he never left her side." (TURN PAGE) "Emma looked at Love and thought, *you are always there. You jump around, you wag your tail, and chase me everywhere. You're there with me when days are good and there when days are sad. You're even in time-out with me whenever I am bad.*" (TURN PAGE) Then Emma "pulled Love close and said to him, 'I know what I should do. You're the best friend in the world - I'm going to be like you!'" So, "The next day when she got to school [Emma] said hello to Bea. 'Instead of sitting by yourself will you come sit with me?'" (TURN PAGE) As time passed Emma and Bea grew to be the best of friends. (TURN PAGE) And then, "One day when they were having tea on the patio (of course), Bea took a sip, and then she said, 'Here's what I'd like to know. The other kids were mean to me, but didn't even know me. The other kids - they left me out. It made me feel so lonely. I'd like to know what made you choose to be so nice instead.' Emma thought... and then she smiled. 'Love,' was all she said."

Today, in our Gospel from Matthew we hear one of our more difficult passages. As Jesus harshly, and frankly unjustly, scolds the Canaanite woman who has been pleading with him to help and heal her daughter. As we hear Jesus, from his stance of authority looking down on the woman saying, "'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'" To which we hear the woman brilliantly, and I would add, graciously respond, from her posture of penitence on her knees, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." It is interesting to note that this passage comes immediately after Jesus' teachings on and slight condemnation of Jewish "table manners", which include strict handwashing procedures as well as rules set out to keep kosher. As Jesus said to the crowds, "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles." Especially now, considering how we just found Jesus turning around and

spitting out his own slanderous accusations against this determined and faithful woman. A woman, like any loving mother, who simply desires to secure healing and relief for her suffering child.

It can be hard for us to imagine that this is Jesus, who according to his own earlier statement regarding what does and does not defile, has now by all accounts defiled himself. Which has led some to argue that Jesus was actually using the woman to prove his earlier point “that it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth.” Especially given that his disciples just a few verses prior had been demanding Jesus “send her away” as she kept shouting and hollering at them. But, if that were the case, then we would be suggesting that Jesus is using this bereft mother as a prop in what I would call a cruel lesson. Even more, in my opinion, to suggest this, is to take away the significance of this woman’s presence and power within our Gospel lesson. Because, if it is true that Jesus accused this woman of being a dog, that this woman continued to appeal to him even after his slanderous insult, and finally that Jesus not only relented but recognized her wisdom and her faith in that moment, causing him not only to open his mind but more so his heart and his mission, in turn becoming more inclusive and expansive in how he lived and moved and had his being THEN, there is hope for you and me for this divisive world and our future as children of God.

I love the story of Emma and Love because it is a reminder of all the ways we are called to pause and remember what it feels like to be ostracized and left out, even more so what it feels like when we are the ones neglecting to include others. More so it reminds us to be attentive and receptive to whomever, whatever, and wherever we find teachers and guides around us. Like with Love, Emma’s dog, she may never have considered her furry, four legged friend to be more than a fabulous companion, she could easily have neglected to see what a transformational teacher and guide her non-verbal pet actually was. Or with Jesus, he could have continued to ignore the Canaanite woman, even more his disciples begging him to quiet her down. He could have simply moved on to the next crowd, the next town, the next part of his mission. But, he took a second look, and in turn gave himself a second chance to change his mind, his life, his mission, his impact on our own lives. How can we pay attention to those teachers and guides who we may be ignoring, but are begging for our attention? More so, how we can we allow others to change our minds so that we can open our hearts and make room for transformation. Not only in our lives, but maybe too then in our world and in the future. We like Jesus, and like Emma, have the ability to be transformed by listening, including, and loving those on the outside. We, like Jesus, can find out what it truly means to have an inclusive, welcoming, and out of this world table, where the only manners that matter are the ones that allow everyone to be welcomed and have a seat, to be fed and enjoy, and to know and share in Love. I hope you will come and have a seat, because you are welcome here!