

Proper 15 A 2017 Sermon

Matthew 15: 21-28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Last Sunday, our Youth Group watched a delightful animated video titled, "Was Jesus of Nazareth God?"¹ In our discussion of the video, we struggled to understand whether Jesus was human or divine, or some mixture of the two. We wrestled with the question, "Was Jesus born knowing everything, or did he have to learn as he grew, like all humans do?" Our youth decided that Jesus **did** have to learn as he grew, just like all human beings.

Which brings us to today's Gospel reading. Jesus is traveling in Gentile territory and is approached by a Canaanite woman who starts shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But Jesus doesn't answer at all. His disciples urge him to send this Gentile woman away. Jesus then says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (And this woman was NOT a member of the house of Israel.) But she persists, coming and kneeling before him, pleading, "Lord, *help* me." But again, Jesus seems unmoved, telling her, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Talk about hurtful! Jesus is treating her abominably! Yet the woman absorbs the blows and persists, replying, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." And this last, poignant remark seems to astonish Jesus, penetrate his consciousness, and stir him to compassion. Amazed by her reply, Jesus says to her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter is healed instantly.

Now, to say that this is a problematic passage is an understatement, for here we have Jesus, whom we *know* to be compassionate, here we have Jesus acting no differently than the dominant Jewish culture of his day – which is to say, he has drawn a firm, exclusive boundary between Jew and Gentile, and treats this Gentile like a dog.

Of course, we Christians, not believing that Jesus could *ever* treat someone who is obviously hurting so abominably, we Christians have come up with all sorts of explanations to account for Jesus' behavior toward this woman. We say, for

instance, “Jesus isn’t **really** being mean to her; he’s just testing her by constructing barriers to see if she’ll overcome them. And then, when she passes her test, he gives her an ‘A’ by healing her daughter.”² But nowhere else in all the Gospels does Jesus do such a thing, treat someone so horribly who is obviously hurting.

So what is happening here? Lutheran seminary President David Lose writes: “I think Jesus has a pretty specific focus for his mission and that focus gets enlarged, broadened, and pretty much broken wide open by the faith and audacity and persistence of this woman.”² Like our Youth Group said, Jesus learns and grows, just like **all** human beings; he wasn’t born with the full, conscious understanding of the universal extent of God’s mercy or of God’s call on his ministry. He had learned from his Jewish upbringing that there is “us,” and there is “them,” Jew and Gentile, and never the twain shall meet. And that’s his default response.

But **something** happens to cut through this culturally-learned and ingrained mindset. The woman says, “...even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table,” and upon hearing that statement, it is as if a dormant gene in Jesus’ spiritual DNA is activated, his soul expands, and he begins to wonder if he was wrong about his mission: Perhaps he had *not* been sent **only** to the lost sheep of Israel, but rather to the whole world? I truly believe that in hearing those poignant words, “even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table,” Jesus heard his Heavenly Father speaking to him from the Gentile woman’s lips.

This interpretation rings true to me because **I** have had the same kind of experiences – and I bet you have, also. Self-confident that my understanding of a certain situation was the “right” understanding, something then happened that blew that self-assured understanding right out of the water, humbled me, and changed my mindset. Perhaps the most memorable example was when I had my mindset changed by my niece and her same-sex partner of 13 years. I saw the powerful and undeniable love of God in that relationship – a love that had survived not just the normal difficulties that heterosexual partners go through in their marriages, but the added stress of the church’s rejection of their relationship, and the rejection of some of their co-workers – a stress which was almost impossible for me to even imagine. Yet they had handled it with incredible forbearance and grace. Just as Jesus’ mindset was changed by the *undeniable faith* of this Gentile woman, so was my mindset changed by the *undeniable love* of God so clearly manifest in the committed and adversity-tested relationship of my niece Jessica and her partner (now wife) Tonya. My self-certain, Bible-verse-supported mindset was unexpectedly and dramatically changed and expanded; and that experience, as well as others like it, has led me to believe that **this** is what is happening in today’s Gospel to the very human Jesus in his encounter with this outcast, yet *undeniably faithful*, Gentile woman.

And I am not alone in this interpretation. Professor David Lose supports this understanding of today’s Gospel passage, writing: “[this] Canaanite woman asks

to be seen and heard, recognized as another child of God. And through her person and her plea, she teaches Jesus something about himself and his mission that is crucial for him to learn. I realize that we may feel uncomfortable with the idea of Jesus ‘learning,’ but I can’t think of another term that better captures Jesus’ expanded sense of mission at this point in the Gospel of Matthew, the gospel that ends with the commission to take the good news to the very ends of the earth.”²

Then Dr. Lose raises the question: What would have happened if the Canaanite woman had **not** spoken up about the less-than-human way Jesus was treating her? “Imagine what would have happened,” Professor Lose asks, “if she had turned away, discouraged, fearful, or defeated. Would Jesus have sensed God’s larger mission? Would he have said that the forgiveness he offers through the gift of his body and blood is ‘for all’ or just ‘for some’? Would he have imagined that God loved and sent him to save the **whole** world, or just part of it? We don’t know. We **do** know, however, that this woman did not retreat to silence but spoke out, offering a testimony that rings down through the ages: ‘See me! See me as a person, not as a woman or a Canaanite or a minority or a foreigner or someone from a different religion or as a burden. See me as a person and child of God.’”²

And Jesus did. And it changed him and his understanding of his calling and his ministry and the amazing expansiveness of God’s love. All because an outcast Gentile woman had the courage to speak up and persevere against the dismissive and denigrating way she and her critically ill daughter were being treated, and claim equal status in the eyes of the One, True God.

My friends, this past week we have been seeing some of this same courageous “speaking up” in the face of unjust treatment and denigration of groups of people – specifically non-White people and Jews (and, of course, Jesus was a Jew). The voices speaking up this week have come from all quarters – CEO’s of prominent corporations, pastors and church leaders, and many politicians on both sides of the aisle. Our own Colorado Senator Cory Gardner pleaded with President Trump, a member of his own party, to speak clearly about what Gardner sees as undeniable evil. “Mr. President,” Senator Gardner pleaded, “we must call evil as it is. They were white supporters of extremism and it was internal terrorism.”³ A similar statement was made by Utah Senator Orin Hatch, another member of President Trump’s own party, who said, “We must call evil by its name. My brother did not give his life, fighting with Hitler and his Nazi ideas, [only] to leave it all unanswered at home.”³ I found that statement particularly powerful. Hundreds of thousands of American soldiers laid down their lives in WWII in a war against the Nazis and all that they stood for. What would those soldiers and their families say to Americans today who are silent in the face of resurgent Nazism on our own soil?

My friends, the last thing I would advocate is a further division in the “us” vs. “them” mentality of our nation. Neo-Nazis and White Supremacists are beloved children of God just as you and I and President Trump are. We should not be

denigrating them as human beings or calling them hateful names. Rather, it is their hateful *behavior*, speech, and ideas we should clearly speak out against clearly, as both Senator Gardner and Senator Hatch and many others did. We must call out evil, bigotry, and hate for what it is.

After all, would **we** (each one of us a Gentile) – would *we* be followers of Jesus today, would there even be Christians today, if that Canaanite woman had remained silent?

AMEN

- 1 <https://www.wearesparkhouse.org/store/product/16598/re-form-Digital-Lesson-Was-Jesus-of-Nazareth-God->
- 2 <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/08/pentecost-11-a-the-canaanite-womans-lesson/>
- 3 <http://thehill.com/homenews/senate/346339-gop-senator-to-trump-we-must-call-evil-by-its-name>