

Sermon: Matthew 15:[10-20] 21-28

This sermon was preached by Vicar Anna Taylor-McCants on August 16, 2020 at Zion Lutheran Church, Ann Arbor and St. Mark Lutheran Church, Ypsilanti. Please email Vicar Anna at annataylorMcCants@gmail.com if you would like to use any part of this sermon in your context.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew 15:21-28.

Matt. 15:21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² 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.” ²³ 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.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶ He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Sermon:

Think about the Near East – or Middle East – for a moment. Think about the news headlines you’ve read, or maybe even the trips you’ve taken. Think about the conflict between the people and nations. Most of us know the conflict in the area runs deep and our Bible story today is an illustration of that.

Our story today occurs in a place called Tyre which is located in modern day Lebanon, just north of Israel. In the very area we just thought about. In Biblical times this area was referred to both as Syria and Phoenicia, and in turn people from this region were often called Syrophenicians. In fact, when this story is recorded in Mark’s gospel it is known as the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman.

But today in our lectionary text – in the gospel of Matthew – it is the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman. It’s the exact same story, though. A woman whose daughter is tormented by a demon comes to Jesus for healing.

And I think it is interesting that in Matthew’s gospel this woman is referred to as a Canaanite. It’s not exactly inaccurate, but it’s not exactly accurate either. According to Biblical tradition, the Canaanites as a people occupying a territory hadn’t existed for quite some time. You remember the story of Moses and Joshua leading the Israelites into Canaan, into the Promised Land? The land flowing with Milk and Honey?

Make no mistake – the naming of this woman as a Canaanite in Jesus’ time period, first century Palestine, is meant to elicit strong feelings from Jesus and his first followers who were Jewish. Their ancestors fought the Canaanites for the land promised to *them* by God. The author of Matthew wants us to know that Jesus was Jewish, and this woman was not. And not only was she *not* Jewish, her ancestors were the enemy.

She was part of the people who were *in the way* of the promise from God – both back then and today. Her history, her ethnicity was problematic to the Jewish people in our story. And this probably influenced their feelings toward the woman.

So, we have this very clearly not Jewish woman coming to Jesus for help, but there is one more thing that is important for us to understand our story in its entirety today, and it's the event that happens in the 10 verses prior to what we just read.

Right before Jesus goes to the region of Tyre, he is speaking with the disciples about something important.

Are you ready?

The disciples tell Jesus that the Pharisees are *angry* with him.

Hahaha. ***Shocker*** It seems like the Pharisees were almost always angry with Jesus...

Anyway, the disciples tell him that the Pharisees took offense to him saying, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." And though it sounds like the disciples supported Jesus, they didn't really understand what Jesus meant either. So Jesus, possibly a little annoyed, tries again to explain what he means. In verse 16 he says, "Are you also still without understanding? 17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? 18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. 19 For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

In other words, Jewish cleanliness laws and customs don't really matter. Who cares what you eat and how? What comes out your heart – who you are – is what has the ability to cause you much more harm. It's very obvious why the pharisees, the keepers of the law, are mad now.

The irony comes from our lectionary reading today when Jesus seemingly forgets what he had just taught the Pharisees and disciples.

A mother, a Gentile mother, a Canaanite mother, came to Jesus and she *begged* him to cast a demon out of her child.

She was scared.

She was hurting.

Her child was in pain.

And she had heard *about Jesus*.

She *must* have heard about Jesus.

Why else would a woman with her background come to a Jewish person for help?

She *knew* who Jesus was.

And actually, she knew who Jesus was better than some of the disciples knew who Jesus was. After watching Jesus walk on the sea of Galilee in the previous chapter the disciples recognized Jesus as the Son of God. But it's not until the next chapter that Peter calls Jesus the Messiah.

So how did this woman in another land, a place where Jesus is not recorded doing any ministry up until this point, how did this woman become the one woman welcome committee for Jesus into Tyre? And *how*, just how, did she recognize him and address him as the Son of David?

She *knew* who Jesus was.

But Jesus ignores her. At least at first.

And if Jesus ignoring her wasn't enough, the disciples urged him to send her away.

Were they tired of hearing her cries?

Were her shouts too pointed?

Were they too burdened to stand up for this woman who was groaning in agony? Could they not repeat her words "my Lord, Son of David" please help?

Did the disciples not know who they followed?

Did they not know the enormity his power?

And so, after his disciples were done speaking, Jesus finally spoke saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." This line right here is so incredibly important. Jesus believed – at least in Matthew's gospel account – that he was sent *only* for the Jewish community.

And this woman, this woman came and knelt at his feet. Y'all remember that catch phrase that came out of the US Senate a few years ago that goes "nevertheless she persisted"? Well... here we are.

Nevertheless, she persisted. She addressed Jesus again. "Lord, help me." Canaanite, Gentile, or not – this woman *knew* who Jesus was.

And wow, this is where this text gets rough. Jesus is either tired or annoyed or **something** at this point because he insults the woman. He answered her, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Now in Jewish culture it was not common to have a dog as a pet, though in some Gentile cultures it was. So, it's possible for Jesus to be speaking from his own cultural context here and likening this woman to a wild dog, and it's also possible he is likening her to a pet dog, which was still less than human. Either way, Jesus called a *female* a dog.

And I have to ask myself, did he not remember what he had just taught the Pharisees and disciples? That what comes out of a person's heart defiles them?

This is a hard text because I think sometimes it's hard for Christians to wrap their minds around the dual nature of Christ – fully human and fully divine. We like to think that Jesus is some perfect being who lived in the world never having a tantrum as a child, never throwing mud at his friends, or never sticking his tongue out at his mom when she told him to wash up for dinner.

But I think that in this moment when Jesus calls this woman to a dog, Jesus' humanity was showing. To be human means to be placed into a certain time period, a certain part of the trajectory of human history. To be human means to be subjected to the things humanity is subjected to. And in this instance Jesus experienced the patriarchal and ethnic biases that people who lived in his time period also experienced. Jesus was born into a feuding system that had been in place for centuries. It was a system that devalued people of different ethnicities and gender identities. It was a system that centered people with power and kicked the oppressed when they were down. It was a system that said God, the great I AM, was only for Jewish folks and those who were willing to keep the law. And it didn't start with him.

But it can end with him.

We are a part of this same system, aren't we?

Just like Jesus we do not get a choice about the circumstances, the worldly structures and powers, into which we are born.

Jesus was born into a system with biases that favored certain people over others, and so are we.

But the most lifegiving part of this story is that Jesus didn't remain in this place. He existed within the systems, but this story proves he wasn't always a product of the system.

If Jesus' mind can be transformed, so can ours. This story gives me so much hope for the people in our church and world who deeply want to love others but aren't always getting it right.

What *happened* between Jesus denying the woman's request for healing, and Jesus healing the woman's daughter?

The woman without power persisted. She responded to Jesus' denial of her request. And Jesus – who really had no control over the system into which he was born nor the people society told him to send away – this Jesus allowed his heart to be transformed by the experience of a marginalized and hurting person.

What if our circumstances, what if our biases don't define us? What if, like Jesus, we get another chance to get it right? What if the grace in *this* story is extended to all of us who are trying to do better?

I believe Jesus was without sin, as do most Christians. By Jesus allowing the Canaanite woman to transform his heart, he was able to transform his bias. This woman recognized his power – that there was enough of him to offer salvation, freedom, and liberation to the Jews *and* Gentiles alike. Jesus was for everyone. And when Jesus allowed his heart to be transformed by the faith of

this woman who hadn't seen him but yet deeply *knew* him, he was able to open up his perspective and be a blessing to this woman and her daughter.

So, I ask you Church, who or what is the Canaanite woman in your life?

In our congregation?

In our neighborhood?

And what is she saying to you?

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Amen.