

[SLIDE – ‘Jesus and the Canaanite Woman’] – Sermon August 16th, 2020 – first draft

For many reasons, this is a challenging text to preach on. We like the Jesus who is healing the sick and feeding the 5,000. The beginning of this story does not portray Jesus in a favorable light. I mean, he calls the woman a dog. As usual, we need to review some background information to understand the setting of this story. I think we will find that this encounter is filled with the same sensitive topics we are dealing with today: ethnicity, gender, and class distinction.

Jesus and his disciples go to the region of Tyre and Sidon. **[SLIDE – map of region and relationship of Tyre/Sidon to Jerusalem]**. Here the Jews are not in positions of power and authority. Some have even been the victim of persecution by the people of Tyre. Canaanites live in this region, and the Jews and Canaanites have a history of battles, conquests, and inter-relationships as well. This Canaanite woman is a non-Jew who is in her hometown, and Jesus is the outsider here.

The woman shouts, **[SLIDE - “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.”]** But Jesus did not answer her. Then the disciples tell Jesus to send her away. Now, how you read this story says something about how you understand Jesus. If you believe Jesus to be knowing all things all the time, then I have an explanation that fits this situation. If you believe that Jesus is not all knowing all the time, then I have an explanation that fits this situation. **[SLIDE – picture of woman kneeling before Jesus]**.

Let’s start with Jesus as not knowing all the time. That means that Jesus is in the process of learning as we move through the Gospel. The question underneath this is, “When did Jesus realize that he is God’s son? When did Jesus fully understand his mission? We want to look at Jesus as always knowing these things, but it seems unlikely that his life and mission were clear to

him as a newborn. At some point, his reality of being fully human and fully divine, and his mission must have come to him. Perhaps at the time of this story, he was not fully there yet. If that is the case, then Jesus is speaking to this woman out of his current context. He is a Rabbi, a teacher of the Jews. It could be, at this time in his ministry, he sees himself as only a savior for the Jews. After all, Jesus responds to the disciples, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” This woman was not Jewish.

The second understanding of Jesus is that he knows exactly what he is doing all the time, or at least in our story today - and Jesus knows what he is saying to this Canaanite woman. We have to ask then why does Jesus say what he says? The woman gets right in front of Jesus. She kneels before him and says, “Lord, help me.” Jesus answers, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Ooh. That’s harsh. If I were a public relations person following Jesus around in that first century, I would have pulled him aside and said, “There is no way we can soften these words Jesus...for generations to come.”

But, if Jesus knows exactly what he is doing all the time, then maybe he is having a teaching moment here for his disciples and the people around him. Some say that Jesus is not talking down to the woman, but he is echoing what his disciples are thinking. As the Reverend Dr. Joy Moore says, ‘Jesus is voicing the prejudices of the disciples.’ **[SLIDE – picture of the disciples with Jesus]**. The disciples see this Canaanite woman as ‘less than’ other people. They may be looking down on her in terms of class, religion, race, or gender. Whatever its’ basis, they are looking down on her. They even tell Jesus to dismiss her and Jesus says what the disciples are thinking – and calls her a dog.

Now, here is where it gets good. She does not back down. She is persistent. **[SLIDE – woman at Jesus feet]**. She takes this metaphor of a dog and throws it back at Jesus. ²⁷She said, **[SLIDE - “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”]**

I have been in plenty of discussions and disagreements to know that she could have handled this differently. She could have said, “Excuse me! What did you just say?” Instead, she is persistent and is calling Jesus to be Jesus. She is holding Jesus accountable as the Son of God, and in the process, she is making a few points about the Kingdom that Jesus is ushering in.

[SLIDE – ‘In God’s Kingdom, there is plenty to go around’ – with picture of feeding of the 5,000]. Do you remember the feeding of the 5,000? Food was abundant, and all were fed and satisfied. God’s Kingdom is one of abundance. The Canaanite woman knows this and tells Jesus that even the crumbs off of God’s table are enough. She knows that God can provide for all.

[SLIDE – ‘God’s kingdom is for ALL of humanity’- with picture of people]. Next, she knows that God WANTS to provide for all of humanity and that Jesus is the one who will make that happen. She knows the heart of God, and calls Jesus and the disciples to be true to it. At God’s heart is a kingdom that is free of divisions based on class, race, and gender. After all, Jesus and the disciples have left their villages and are now standing in her hometown. Jesus either goes there, or God sends him there, for a reason.

Before our Gospel reading today, there is a lesson from Jesus that frames this encounter. Jesus says in **[SLIDE ‘Matthew 15:11 “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”**
Matthew 15: 19-20. “For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with

unwashed hands does not defile.”]. Out of the heart comes evil intentions like racism, bigotry, sexism, prejudices, and oppression. God’s Kingdom is not like that.

The Canaanite woman probably knows something about prejudice and oppression. She calls out to Jesus, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!” The Gospel of Matthew starts with the lineage of Jesus, and King David is in that lineage. **[SLIDE – picture of King David]**. King David was involved in the killing of Canaanites. Interestingly, she acknowledges that part of Jesus' lineage. It is ironic that she comes to Jesus with this title and in this way because she is someone who probably shouldn’t know who Jesus is.

Not only does she know Jesus, but she also knows that she can lean into God's promise! She knows the God of David is faithful and that the history of both of their peoples is made new in God’s Kingdom – where God comes to both Jew and Gentile.

Jesus is in a foreign land. He is the outsider. **[SLIDE – picture of woman at Jesus feet]**. The Canaanite woman calls out to Jesus. She even falls at his feet and gets in his way. She is persistent, and I like that about her. She will not give up. It’s a climax of the story where Jesus must stop and address her.

This woman had a lot of faith and Jesus names that. She tells Jesus that a demon torments her daughter, but her daughter is not physically present with her. **[SLIDE – picture of someone praying today]**. Maybe her daughter is so out of control that she cannot bring her to Jesus. I see the similarity when we pray to Jesus. We pray things like, “Lord, help me with this relationship problem in my life. Help me with this financial situation over here, and with my work..over there.” We know that God can help us with any situation that feels out of our control.

She doesn’t ask Jesus to heal her daughter; she simply asks for mercy. She knows that God's mercy is enough for all and that God’s mercy can and will make all things right in God’s

Kingdom. Jesus replies in [Matthew 15:28. “**Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.**” **And her daughter was healed instantly**’]. God’s Kingdom is for all of humanity, and there is plenty to go around.

In this story, I appreciate the persistence of the woman. [SLIDE – **picture of a woman before Jesus**]. Jesus calls it her faith. Part of having faith has persistence. I remember growing up in my parent’s home. If I had a concern or asked for something, I knew that their first answer was not always their final decision. Sometimes I would persist, and plant the bug in their ear. Then I would give them time to talk in private together and hash it out. Later, they would return to me either with an answer or maybe with a few more questions. I knew I could be persistent because I had faith that they loved and cared for me.

This Canaanite woman knows the heart God and the heart of Jesus. Similarly, we know that God loves and cares for us. [SLIDE – **picture of people of multiple races**]. We can be persistent because the Gospel message is for all of us: male, female, adult, child, American, non-American, native, indigenous, and immigrant. We can lean into God’s promise (abundant life with Jesus and freedom from sin and death)– and let all the nonsense that divide us fall to the side.

When we lean into God’s promise, we have a life with God through Christ. [SLIDE – **picture of the empty cross**]. Neither sin nor death can separate us from the love of God. Furthermore, we can hold God accountable for this promise - God wants us to - and we do this through faith in Christ. Each of us can pray with confidence – [SLIDE “**Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!**”] For God’s mercy is abundant. The mercy Jesus grants the Canaanite woman is enough to heal her daughter. There is plenty to go around. Even pieces that fall off of the table are plenty to sustain each of us into eternity.

We can each pray with persistence [**SLIDE – ‘Pray with Persistence’ with picture of someone praying**] because God’s Kingdom is for all of us. Like that Canaanite woman, we can claim God because God claims us – in this life and the next.

In closing, I want to leave you with Romans 14:7-8. This is posted on the obituary of Pastor Don Hesterman, and it seems fitting. Pastor Hesterman knew something about faith and the abundant mercy of God. He knew that God is faithful during his 98 years on this earth, and now he claims it for eternity.

[SLIDE Romans 14:7-8

"None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.

If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord.

So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."]

AMEN