

The Canaanite Woman – She Persisted  
by Rev. Michael Blackwood  
United Church of Broomfield  
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Matthew 15:21-28

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.

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What is this story all about? What are we supposed to learn from this story?

- The miraculous healing of the woman's demon-possessed daughter?
- The miracle of the faith of Gentiles (this foreign woman in particular) as that which gives them access to healing and salvation?

Yes. And no.

The simple and basic answer is yes, it's a story about faith. But once you start digging down into the minute details of the story, it becomes apparent that there is a lot going on here. Comparing the Markan version of this story, which would have been written first, against this Matthean version sheds light on the complexities of the story back then. Now add two thousand years of history. Put this story in front of us, 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans, living in a country experiencing political, social, economic, racial, ethnic and cultural controversies and how do we approach this story and interpret it? As simply a story about miraculous healing and faith?

Yes. And no.

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We struggle with this story because, "nowhere else in the Gospel tradition does Jesus address a sincere petitioner with such harsh, insulting language" (Meier 1994).

This is a Jesus we don't recognize and for many of us, we simply want to reject.

A woman approaches him, begging for help. He is silent, ignoring her. She continues her plea. So, in verse 24, Jesus says, "I was sent ONLY to the lost sheep of the House of Israel."

- ONLY?
- Does that sit with what you've been taught about Jesus? Read about Jesus? Know about Jesus? No.
  - The Jesus we know doesn't exclude, but INCLUDES...includes radically and without condition, right? Yet, here is our brother and teacher, our savior telling a desperate mother asking for help for her daughter, "Sorry. Can't help you. You're not one of the chosen."
    - Wait, I thought Jesus' ministry was about the Good News being for *everyone*, NOT just "the chosen?"
  - In the scriptures immediately preceding these, Jesus is debating and chastising the Pharisees for their exclusion and hypocrisy. Because the disciples didn't wash their hands before eating, they are considered unworthy and excluded from the temple and from the blessings of God; they're not following the rules that the chosen people are supposed to follow.
    - Jesus preached that it didn't matter if one followed those "human-enforced" rules, so why is he now erecting some sort of ethnic-religious barrier against this Canaanite woman?
  - Jesus actually utters words that talk about the limitations of God's grace, rather than its abundance. What?
    - After telling the Canaanite Woman that she doesn't fall within the purview of his mission, he then insults her. "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." He's calling her, and her sick, demon-possessed daughter, b-----s! There is a woman with a sick child, begging at Jesus' feet for help and he dismisses her, calling her a b----. That's your Jesus! And mine.
    - Interestingly enough, there are scholars who play around with the Greek wording and say that the word used in this verse actually means "puppies," or "little house dogs," in an attempt to save face for Jesus. "Oh, Jesus was just using a harmless word. Puppies are cute. "House dogs" were welcomed in the house and not like wild, savage dogs who were outside of the house.
      - The idea of Jesus uttering such an insult is very bothersome to me and I struggle with him saying it, but let's call a spade a spade. Does it really matter if the dog is inside or outside of the house? Does it matter if the dog is young or old? He called her a b---- and there's no way of getting around it or softening the shock and hurt of it.
  - This disrespectful and prejudiced man can't be my Jesus?

In continued attempts to "save face" and rationalize Jesus' words and actions, scholars have presented other interesting explanations.

- Jesus was tired and having a bad day.

- Do I really need to even talk about this rationale? It could very well have been true, but it doesn't negate or excuse these words and actions as rude and offensive.
- Jesus was testing her faith.
  - Again, this could be true, but this is Jesus. Do we really think that THIS is how Jesus would test her?
- This story isn't an actual incident from Jesus life.
  - It's possible that *some* of the early Jewish followers of Jesus may have created this story in order to manipulate potential followers and dissuade others, but why would first-century Christians create such a story that thoroughly contradicts and embarrasses its leader? As I've said already, nowhere else in the Gospels doesn't "*this Jesus*" appear, so why keep it in?

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So, who is this woman?

Matthew tells us she's a Canaanite, while Mark tells us that she's a Greek, of Syrophenician origin. Either way, it says some interesting things about her. If she were Greek, scholarly research confirms that she was likely educated, upper-class and with money. If she was in fact a Canaanite, or of Canaanite lineage, it would suggest she was "an enemy" of the Jewish people. Considering these two possibilities, how does this affect how you view this story?

If she is in fact educated, upper-class and with money, does it change how we respond to Jesus' ignoring and insulting her? If she's an enemy of the Jewish people, poor and marginalized does it make it easier to empathize with her?

The traditional view of the woman in this story is that she exemplifies a model of humility and submissiveness. Whether she's Greek or Canaanite, her faith in Jesus leads her to confront Jesus in public, for all to see. She places herself in a position, kneeling before Jesus, shouting and begging for him to help heal her daughter.

It's important to recognize that even though the Canaanite (or Syrophenician) woman doesn't have a name, what she does have is a voice. She has words. She engages in actual dialogue with Jesus. And what does she do with her words?

She persists.

Despite ethnic and racial boundaries, she persists.

Despite gender boundaries, she persists.

Despite socioeconomic boundaries, she persists.

Despite cultural and societal norms, she persists.

Nevertheless, she persisted.

I'm sure you're all familiar with this quote from Senator Mitch McConnell, responding to Senator Elizabeth Warren's being silenced, officially by a party-line vote in the Senate, when Senator Warren attempted to read a letter by Coretta Scott King from 1986 describing Jeff Sessions's civil rights records. Senator Sessions was being considered for Attorney General at the time (and we know how that went).

The response to these events just 2 years ago, turned the phrase, "nevertheless, she persisted" into a viral meme, used by women persisting in breaking barriers despite being silenced or ignored. Is it possible to see the Canaanite woman as the Elizabeth Warren of her time?

The Canaanite woman is the protagonist in this story. She initiates the encounter with Jesus, advocating for her daughter. Her child is in need and she will do whatever she must to heal her. She doesn't approach Jesus just because he happens to be some miracle-maker passing through town. She knows of him, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." The fact that she says this tells us that she knows about the Jewish traditions and Jesus' lineage. She gives Jesus his authority. "I know who you are...who you REALLY are. You ARE the Messiah. You preach of a new way to live. A new way to love. A path for everyone. You can heal my daughter."

Jesus is silent. He ignores her.

She persists. Shouting her pleas.

The disciples say, "She keeps shouting. Send her away."

Jesus tells her, she's outside of the realm of his ministry. "I was sent ONLY to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

She persists. Kneeling before him, she says, "Help me."

He then insults her. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

She persists. Again, acknowledging his authority, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

What did she say?

She said, "God's table is so abundantly overflowing, that there's enough bread on the table, as well as beneath the table. God's table is so abundant that even though there are only two loaves for 5,000, when the meals is over, the "crumbs" fill twelve baskets. God's table is so abundant, that there is plenty for more than ONLY the lost sheep of the house of Isarel."

She persisted.

And Jesus said, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

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There is an argument that says Jesus was product of his culture; prejudiced against Canaanites. But he allowed a foreign woman to expand his views. Was Jesus changed by this woman’s boldness? That’s a question we need to engage. If yes, then this would suggest that his words and actions are from the life of a very real and very human Jesus. An imperfect Jesus. YES – an imperfect, flawed Jesus. THAT really pushes many of us. To even consider that Jesus, the Son of God, WASN’T perfect, challenges our entire belief in the church, our approach to the Trinity and God’s omnipotence and omniscience.

These are big questions. Questions that deserve lots of thought, discussion and prayer. This is why I believe this story is more complex than just a simple story about miraculous healing or faith.

Where is the good news in all of this?

The good news is that, just like the Canaanite woman, we can ask Jesus tough questions and rightfully demand answers. We can have such an opportunity to get closer to Jesus and God. We get to live a deep and personal faith in which we benefit from the ministry of Jesus and then get to share our own ministry of trust, engagement and love.

In the words of Frances Gench, “May the Canaanite woman continue to inspire in us the same boldness in prayer and persistence in faith that clings to God’s promises. May the God who has drawn close to us with a human face bless us also with a saving presence. And may their mutual story help us imagine and define our own daily lives as ministry that crosses boundaries dividing the human family, so that we, too, may bear witness to the inclusive power, presence, and mercy of God” (Gench 2004).

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