

## Great Faith

Matthew 15: (10-20) 21-28

Our scripture is about boundaries, prejudice, perseverance, God's mercy and great faith. Jesus attitude and language in his encounter with the Canaanite woman was shocking. He had just criticized Pharisees about being more concerned about talk and law-keeping rather than living lives of compassion and mercy and now we witness a scene in the life of Jesus that implies that he may not have put his money where his mouth was. Jesus had journeyed to the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon, into an area that was not considered a "nice" part of the country. He traveled into "unwashed" territory that tradition considered a "toxic waste area." Jesus was in the Gentile region where prudent Israelites did not walk alone. Racial stereotypes and bigotry informed all encounters between Israelites and Canaanites. The disciples walked with full attention, informed by the stories of animosity and violence. What church and what Christian has not pointed to a territory that is considered an unclean, miry, dangerous place where discipleship may well be polluted? This was their situation. Differences of ethnicity, heritage, religion, and gender separated this woman and her neighbors from Judean social norms. Further, demon possession marginalized her daughter.

Jesus had this encounter with these two anonymous women, socially marginalized, "unclean" and "unwanted," for whom tradition had proven to be a "holy" fence, keeping them on the outside. However, on behalf of her anonymous, Gentile daughter, this anonymous, Gentile woman refuses to allow even Jesus to let "tradition" become an external barrier, blocking access to the grace of God. The woman was simply seeking deliverance for her demon-possessed daughter, and yet he called her a dog—a name that his fellow Jews routinely gave to Gentile pagans.

Additionally the woman's behavior was unacceptable. Her culture expected women to be reserved in public. When she not only took the initiative but also shouted her demand at Jesus, she violated numerous social norms.

First, Jesus was silent in the face of her cries, refusing even to acknowledge her (v. 23); then, he said that his mission was "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (v. 24); finally, he told her that the "food" for the children should not be thrown to the "dogs" (v. 26)—non-Israelites like her. The very word "Canaanite" is charged with theological significance. It stirred up memories of ancient foes—idol-worshiping enemies over against whom the people of Israel defined themselves. The incident in our scripture raises deep questions about prejudice, divine election, and the limits of God's mercy. However *mercy* was all she sought for herself and her daughter. Although she was not an Israelite, she clearly knew a good deal about Jesus and his reputation as a healer. She knew that his exorcisms in particular were being talked about in messianic terms (Matt. 12:23), and she cried out for mercy from this "Son of David" (15:22).

At this point the woman's manners change. She fell down at Jesus' feet in a gesture of reverence and pleaded, "Help me" (v. 25). *Kyrie eleison*—"Lord, have mercy." The prayer rings down through the centuries, chanted in cloisters, whispered in hospitals, screamed out on battlefields. It is the cry of the soul in extreme need, a raw witness to the depth and the misery of the human condition. On this occasion, Jesus was silent in the face of it. Remarkably, the woman was undeterred by Jesus' indifference. Still she kept shouting. Further, his disciples recognize the social offense of her shouting and implore Jesus to send her away.

Her confidence was on solid grounds, for mercy, which is what she craved, was absolutely central to Jesus' ministry. Twice, in previous clashes with the Pharisees over questions of ritual purity and obedience to the law of God, Jesus quoted

Hosea 6:6: "I desire mercy not sacrifice" (Matt. 9:13; 12:7). Mercy was the cornerstone of his critique of their religion and lifestyle.

Just before the story of the Canaanite, there is a further clash with the Pharisees on these very same issues, but this time there was no quotation from Hosea. It is as if the woman herself was making the prophetic point: mercy, not sacrifice! However, there was one major obstacle in the way of her quest for mercy, and it was Jesus who seemed to put it there. The "food" he brought was intended for the children, not the dogs. He was saying that the doctrine of the election of Israel—a doctrine that, in the hands of the religious leaders who were so critical of him, had become one of favoritism, exclusion, and contempt—meant that she could not receive mercy.

Again the Canaanite was undeterred. As Karoline Lewis observes, "The woman, aware of her location and the limitations placed on her, does not succumb to them but brings them into the light and calls them into question: 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.'" She did not object to God's having mercy on the chosen people. To the contrary, she seized on it as the grounds of her own hope. She grasped the fact that the fundamental basis of election is God's decision to be a merciful God: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (Exod. 33:19; Rom. 9:15). This is the way that God has determined to be God—through mercy.

Again and again she violated boundaries, boundaries set up because of ethnicity, heritage, religion, gender, and demon possession. She even had to contend with Jesus' seemingly reluctance to violate the ethnic boundary; but contend she did. In the grand scheme of what she had heard about Jesus, she believed that she and her daughter were people who should benefit from God's ruling activity (God's kingdom). So she was willing to break through the barriers, and breaking through the barriers dramatized her faith. When the Canaanite

believed that she and her daughter should receive mercy from the ruling activity of God, this is what Jesus called faith.

She understood what Jesus revealed in his conversation with another "outsider," that "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). While mercy may begin with Israel, she knew it could not end there, because of the very nature of Israel's God. It overflows to others in the house—even to "the dogs." The woman would not be deterred. Even though the language of "little dogs" was dehumanizing, the Canaanite woman identified with them to claim the crumbs under the table (v. 27). With this the story moves away from social affront to affirmation. None other than Jesus identified her actions as manifesting great faith, and the healing of her daughter confirmed God's mercy upon them (v. 28).

Matthew's story foreshadows the closing charge from the risen Jesus: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). Yes, Jesus had come to fulfill God's promise to the people of Israel, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24). Whatever Jesus meant by those sharp words, Matthew cites them to remind the church always to rejoice that God's love and promise for Israel is fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Those of Gentile stock, adopted into this covenant tradition, need never forget this and never tire in giving thanks that, in Jesus, God's covenant promises stretch the length of the cross for *all* nations. **Gary W. Charles**

The woman came to Jesus with a crystal, unshakable conviction that God's mercy was enough for her daughter and for herself. Jesus had witnessed faith like this in a Gentile before, prompting him to foresee a time when "many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 8:11). With obvious delight he commended her "great faith" and granted her request. **Iwan Russell-Jones, Jae Won Lee and Dock Hollingsworth**

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