

MOVED BY A CANAANITE
Matthew 15:21-28

This morning, we continue in the Gospel of Matthew. After the “walking on water” event that we looked at last Sunday, Matthew records an event where Jesus had a notable interaction with the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Following that, the story that is today’s text is told by Matthew. The stories of Jesus in the gospels in the New Testament can often startle us, encourage us, or motivate us. This story is no exception. The story of the interaction between Jesus and a Canaanite woman has the potential to challenge our ways of being and thinking. I think this story inspires a few notable ideas for us to consider and adopt as we continue in our journey of being followers of Jesus. Let’s look at the story and allow the ideas about how the story might challenge our thinking and being to flow.

Matthew begins this story about Jesus by commenting that Jesus left where he was and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. It seems that Jesus had most recently been on the northwest coast area of the Sea of Galilee. There, he had been besieged by people who were looking for healing. At the end of Matthew 14, Matthew summarized this activity by saying that all who touched Jesus were healed. We can imagine that Jesus might have been overwhelmed by the requirements of caring about a large number of people. Then, in today’s chapter and preceding our story, Jesus had an intense discussion with the Pharisees and teachers of the law. We’ll return to that later. At this point, we simply add that intense discussion to the items that Jesus must have found emotionally draining. Likely, that emotional drain is the reason that Matthew describes Jesus’ movement as “withdrawing.” So, Jesus got out of Israel, possibly to get away from all the demands he was experiencing.

Well, the demands did not stop because he got away from Israel. There, in the region of Tyre and Sidon, a Canaanite woman came to Jesus with a cry for help. She called for Jesus to help her with her terrible problem of having a daughter who suffered from demon possession. Apparently, Jesus ignored her. At least, Matthew says that he did not answer a word. It seems that Jesus’ silence did not deter her. It seems that she continued to cry out. Eventually, the disciples tired of this and urged Jesus to get rid of her. It appears from the story that Jesus was willing to talk to the disciples. He had not become completely uncommunicative. He told them that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. From the words that Matthew records, we would have to conclude that Jesus was saying that his mission was only to the people of Israel. He wouldn’t have anything to do with this Canaanite woman.

Then the woman came right up to him and knelt in front of him. She called him Lord and begged for his help. She identified a high view of who Jesus was and approached with a posture of worship. Finally, Jesus spoke to her. What he said to her sounds demeaning to us. He said that it wouldn’t be right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs. It certainly sounds like Jesus was identifying the people of Israel as the children and the bread as his ministry to them. The dogs, then, were people who were not the people of Israel. Jesus’ ministry was not for the dogs. Perhaps this was not as demeaning as it sounds to us, but it doesn’t sound good to

us. Megan Good says of this story that it just plain makes Jesus look bad. (Good, [The Bible Unwrapped](#), p. 113) It certainly sounds like Jesus was turning this woman away. But the woman persisted. She turned the analogy that Jesus had just used on its head and noted that the dogs sniff around the table and eat the crumbs that fall on the floor. Any of us who have eaten at table with pet dogs around while we eat know this to be true. The dogs are looking for food to eat and will clean up what falls to the floor. With her analogy, the woman was suggesting that Jesus could conceivably do something beneficial for people that were not Israelites even if it amounted to small scraps of his ministry. Jesus was favorably impressed with the woman's attitude, belief, and response. He commended her faith and told her that her request was granted. Matthew concludes the story by telling us that her daughter was healed in that instant.

It's not clear how we should understand this interaction and the way that Jesus treated the Canaanite woman. Did Jesus mean it when he said that he was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel? That understanding is not out of the question. In Matthew 10, when Jesus sent his twelve disciples out on a mission of healing ministry, he told them to not go to the Gentiles or the Samaritans. They should stick to ministering to pure Israelites. That sounds horribly closed to us, but it would go along with his statement here that he was only sent to Israel. We don't want to believe that Jesus meant that literally and seriously. I want to think differently of Jesus than that and we need only point to the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4 or at the final result of this story to recognize that Jesus did not ultimately reject ministry to people other than pure Israelites. But, what if this story of Jesus precedes other stories of Jesus' positive response to non-Israelites? What if this woman's response had such a strong impact on Jesus that Jesus recognized it as requiring him to change his focus away from Israel only? I'm doubting that's the best way to understand the story, but it's an interesting possibility to consider. Then, it would encourage those of us who feel like our attempts to advocate for what is right are falling on deaf ears to continue advocating for those who are experiencing injustice. We could feel encouraged that it's not useless to keep on fighting for what is right.

That's the understanding of this story that underlies a piece of poetry I found as I was researching sources in relation to this text. Jan Richardson, an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church says this about the story. "... the story shows us that when it comes to saving what needs saving, being merely nice and pliant won't win the day, or the life. Sometimes we need to dig in our heels and do some hollering." ([Stubborn Blessing « The Painted Prayerbook](#)) Richardson has written a poem entitled "Stubborn Blessing," penned from the perspective of the Canaanite woman, reflecting that understanding of the story. It feels quite powerful to me as I think of ourselves exercising our belief that God's way includes saving what needs saving, and I thought it was worth reading to you.

Don't tell me no. I have seen you feed the thousands, seen miracles spill from your hands like water, like wine,
Seen you with circles and circles of crowds pressed around you and not one soul turned away

Don't start with me.
I am saying you can close the door but I will keep knocking.
You can go silent but I will keep shouting.

You can tighten the circle but I will trace a bigger one around you,
Around the life of my child who will tell you no one surpasses a mother for stubbornness.

I am saying I know what you can do with crumbs and I am claiming mine,
Every morsel and scrap you have up your sleeve.
Unclench your hand, your heart.
Let the scraps fall like manna, like mercy
For the life of my child, the life of the world.

Don't you tell me no. ([Stubborn Blessing « The Painted Prayerbook](#))

I'm not a big fan of poetry, but Jan Richardson's poem felt very meaningful to me. That understanding of the interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman would inspire us to keep on pursuing the saving of what needs to be saved. It would inspire our pursuit of justice for those who don't have a voice and those who need support. It would inspire us to not give up in our prayers for the right to happen in our world.

Perhaps I should stop right there, but that's only one way to understand the impact of this story. What if that's not the way to understand Jesus in this story? What if Jesus wasn't actually trying to close the door to the Canaanite woman? What if Jesus and the Canaanite woman were engaging in a bit of witty repartee? Maybe they were having fun with each other, and Jesus was actually going to help her all along. Maybe Jesus was using this event to teach the people around him that God's goodness was for all.

Whether Jesus was or wasn't trying to teach a lesson, and we can't know that for certain, it seems to me that Matthew uses the story to teach a lesson about boundaries and acceptance. Matthew does the same thing as Mark in his gospel by pairing this story with a story about an intense encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Before today's story, some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus to ask why Jesus' disciples didn't properly wash their hands before they ate. They weren't concerned with physical cleanliness. They were talking about a certain ritual washing that they taught was needed before eating. Jesus' disciples weren't doing it and the Pharisees and teachers of the law were asking about it. The way Jesus responded certainly suggests that he heard their question as a critique of the disciples. He proceeded to criticize their insistence on rituals while they failed to treat people with the love and care called for by God. They were so tied up with getting their picky rules right that they missed the bigger picture that God wanted them to see. They thought that somehow it mattered what they put in their mouths and how they did it. Jesus said that people are made unclean not by what they put in their mouths but by the quality of actions that come out of their hearts.

I think that Matthew quite intentionally put these two stories together as Mark also had done. They wanted their readers to understand that God's desires for humanity were not bound up in ritualistic regulations. God's desires for humanity were for love and fair treatment. Matthew solidified his point by changing one detail in the story from the way that Mark had told it. Mark had written about a Syro-Phoenician woman, a woman from the region of Syria and Phoenicia. Matthew changed it to a Canaanite woman. Matthew's readers, a largely Jewish community, would have been challenged by the Canaanite woman in the story. The Canaanites

were the people that had always been seen as the thorn in the side of Israel. From the time of the story of the Israelites entering the land of Canaan, the Canaanites had always been the people who either made life hard for the Israelites or led them away from being faithful to God. To the people of Israel, the Canaanites were awful. By naming the woman in this story as a Canaanite, Matthew was emphasizing that God's love and acceptance went way beyond what Israel would have imagined. Joining the Canaanite woman story with Jesus' emphasis to the Pharisees and teachers of the law about God calling them to love and justice rather than ritual, Matthew presented a powerful call to open the doors of acceptance wide. Matthew was telling his readers that God's love overflows. It is like the bread on the table in the Canaanite woman's response to Jesus. It overflows the table and draws in people to eat that might have been thought to be left out. Matthew was telling his Jewish readers that God's welcome went beyond their Jewish community.

If that's the way to understand the purpose of the story, then we have a reminder to be careful about drawing boundaries around who we think can be accepted by God. Then we have a call to be a lovingly, inclusive community, a community that welcomes broadly while remaining focused on following Jesus. Then we experience a call to examine our own attitudes and actions. Do we think deep down that there are groups and categories of people that are outside the welcome of God?

We have considered two ways of reading this story of the interaction between Jesus and a Canaanite woman. Either way that we read the story of the interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman provides a rich encouragement. I'll invite you to reflect further on the story and decide for yourself whether you read this as encouraging us to cry out to God and advocate for justice or as encouraging the church to be radically hospitable. Either way, like Jesus, we can be moved by the Canaanite woman.