

## ***“The Canaanite Woman and Jesus”***

[Matthew 15:21-28](#)

The story of the Canaanite woman and Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew is one of the scriptures that is often used for a Mother’s Day Sunday worship service. Of course, the homiletical attention is given to the woman who pleaded with Jesus for the healing of her daughter who was suffering from a mental illness. Usually, preachers highlight the persistence of the mother who endured humiliation for her daughter’s sake. She is lifted up as a role model for all mothers as we thank God for their sacrificial love.

Yet, whenever I read this story, I can’t help but feel uncomfortable with the picture of Jesus it presents. We imagine Jesus as a kind, gentle, compassionate, merciful, and open-minded person. But, that is not what we see in today’s scripture. Here, Jesus appears to be rude to the woman who comes to him, seeking help for her daughter. His words to her sound very hurtful. He seems to be exclusive instead of inclusive. What is going on?

Typically, commentators offer two kinds of interpretations of these puzzling actions and words of Jesus. Some say that Jesus already knew all about the woman’s situation and was going to heal her daughter. But, he pretended to ignore her and said harsh words to her because he was just testing her faith. Some others argue that Jesus was trying to teach his disciples through this interaction with the woman.

In such interpretations, there are these assumptions: with his supernatural power, Jesus already knew everything and he was always right; with his characteristics of the Messiah, Jesus was perfectly loving and caring, and he always welcomed everyone without any prejudice.

But, what if we read this story and any other story of Jesus in the Gospels without these assumptions? What if Jesus did not know everything already? What if Jesus did not fake his words and actions towards the woman? What if what Jesus did and said to her were what he had actually meant? What if Jesus’ attitude toward the Gentiles was not too far off from that of a typical Jewish person in his time and place? What if Jesus was actually exclusionary towards foreigners until he experienced a change of heart when confronted by this desperate mother? What if Jesus learned from his encounter with the Canaanite woman?

These what-ifs may sound offensive to some of us because they seem to make Jesus less than perfect. So, please bear with me as we walk through the text, trying to read it from a different perspective.

As the story begins, we find Jesus entering the region of Tyre and Sidon, outside the Jewish boundaries on the north. We are not told why Jesus goes there. Perhaps, he is going to minister to the Jews who live there. Or, perhaps he is simply trying to get away from the crowds of people who were following him

everywhere. Whatever the reason, soon, a woman appears and begins to shout, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David: my daughter is tormented by a demon.” Though she is a foreigner, she knows who Jesus is. Apparently, the news of Jesus’ miracles has already reached this non-Jewish territory.

What is Jesus’ response to her plea? He just ignores her. We are told that Jesus does not answer her *at all*. But, she persists. She continues her shouting. You can imagine the woman was causing quite a scene. Apparently, annoyed by her constant shouting, Jesus’ disciples ask their teacher to send her away. So Jesus says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

It appears that the disciples delivered Jesus’ words to her. They probably thought that this would get her to stop bothering them. That she would be discouraged by Jesus’ exclusionary remarks. But, that was not what happened! Instead, she goes directly to Jesus and kneels before him, showing her respect for him. She continues her plea, saying, “Lord, help me.” Now, Jesus has no other option than to directly deal with this woman who isn't taking “No” for an answer. What does Jesus say to her? He says, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Jesus' comment appears rather blunt and rude. But in his defense, Jesus has a clear sense of mission: he believes that he has been called to minister only to his own people, the Israelites. This woman is a Canaanite, a non-Jew. She is outside the bounds of his mission. And also, though Jesus’ words to her may sound very harsh, dogs and pigs were how the Israelites commonly referred to the Gentiles, who did not share their sanitary rules and regulations.

Now what does she do? This desperate mother never gives up. She says, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” Her response is bold. She does not accept the labels imposed on her. She does not accept the boundaries Jesus drew between his people and her people. Her response is witty. She does not criticize Jesus for his racism but challenges him in an insightful and clever way. Hearing her words, Jesus says to the Canaanite woman, “Woman, great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish.”

Did you catch that? Did you notice what just happened? Jesus changed his mind. Through this brief encounter with the Canaanite woman, he had a change of heart. This Jesus we see at the end of the story is not the same Jesus we see in the beginning of the story. He is no longer a narrow-minded first century Jew, who is bound by the belief and culture of his time.

Perhaps, hearing the creative and challenging words from the mouth of the Gentile woman, a desperate mother, was a big Aha moment for Jesus. What if the interaction with her has an impact on him. That through her, Jesus experiences a change of heart. And as a result, he changes his mind not only about the Gentile woman but also the nature of his mission.

What if from her, he learns that the Gentiles also could have faith. What if from her he learns that he was sent for a broader mission of bringing God’s salvation beyond the boundaries of his own people. Perhaps

through his encounter with the Canaanite woman, the persistent mother who does not give up, Jesus is able to see something that no one thinks possible - bringing God's salvation to the Gentiles. Perhaps, through her boldness and persistence, the Canaanite woman plants seeds of greater openness in the heart of Jesus - the beginning of his vision of God's kingdom that never stops growing.

I do not think this way of interpreting today's scripture diminishes Jesus' power and authority as our Lord and Savior. We all know it takes great courage to admit that we are wrong. In fact, Jesus modeled for us some 2,000 years ago what we are only now discovering: That true courage requires vulnerability. And we need to learn this lesson from Jesus: the willingness to be vulnerable, grow from our experience, and change.

Today, there seems to be so much emphasis on being right. It is a spirit of self-righteousness, the same spirit which ruled over the Pharisees and Sadducees, which threatens to rule over our public discourse and our relationships with other people. Divided into two sides over political issues, we claim we are right and lord over others who we judge to be wrong. Divided into two sides over faith issues, we Christians say my way is the right way, that it is the only way.

But, when you are self-righteous, when have this attitude and belief that you are always right and you cannot be possibly wrong, you cannot enter a genuine relationship with anyone. This type of rigidity takes us away from being in relationship with each other. And being in relationship with each other, beyond categories of race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, political and religious affiliation, is at the very heart of the gospel that we believe and try to live out.

Here is a quote from Richard Rohr which speaks to our need to embrace vulnerability for the sake of relationship (Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, May 9, 2019)

"I would name *salvation* as simply the readiness, the capacity, and the willingness to stay in relationship. As long as you show up with some degree of vulnerability, the Spirit can keep working. *Self-sufficiency makes God experience impossible!* That's why Jesus showed up in this world as a naked, vulnerable one, a defenseless baby lying in the place where animals eat. Talk about utter relationship! Naked vulnerability means I'm going to let you influence me; I'm going to allow you to change me."

The readiness, the capacity, and the willingness to stay in relationship, this is what Jesus models for us in his encounter with the unnamed Canaanite woman as we celebrate the love of God we witness in Mother's love. This is the salvation of God we find in Jesus Christ, whose heart and mind were forever changed through his willingness to be confronted by this Gentile woman, a Canaanite woman. May that be the role model for all of us as we seek to understand God's love through our mothers, and practice that love in our own relationships.

Amen!