

## Albany Presbyterian Church

August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2026,    Matthew 15:21-29    Great Faith

The story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew's gospel is well known to some of us who grew up in the Christian faith. This is also a story that stirs debate for some of us, especially because of what's going on in parts of the world where ethnic conflicts persist; for example, a few days ago in the West Bank, Israeli settlers besieged Palestinian families who have lived there for generations, blocked the roads and cut off their water.

The story took place in the region of Tyre and Sidon, modern-day Syria. Back in chapter 14, Jesus and his disciples crossed Lake Galilee and came to Gennesaret. We are told that news of him spread throughout the area; people began to bring all their sick to Jesus to heal them.

In the earlier verses of chapter 15, Matthew tells us that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law came down from Rome, accusing his disciples of violating the law of purity by not washing their hands before they eat. Jesus became indignant, and a fierce disagreement broke out over their interpretation of the law. "You nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition." They were like those whom Isaiah had prophesied about, saying, "These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men."

This story of the Canaanite woman is also found in Mark 7:24-30. Mark tells us that Jesus left Gennesaret to go to a foreign territory among the Gentiles, to get away from the Pharisees. In Mark, Jesus stays in a house, wanting to be away from people. And so, this woman found out where he was; she was unwelcome, unwanted, to say the least.

**I am troubled** that Jesus is so unkind to this woman, a desperate mother seeking healing for her sick daughter. According to Mark, the woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia, and she is called a Canaanite, a term that describes a broad ethnic group. We know that the Canaanites were the enemies of the Israelites, going back to when the Israelites entered the promised land, the land of Canaan. Historically, they are known to have lived in moral and religious wickedness. Yet they were also the sons of Noah and Ham in Genesis. Jebusites, Amorites, Hittites, and so on, from whom good people of God in the Bible come, for example, Rahab, who helped the Israelites' spies in Jericho; Ruth, a Moabite who married one of Naomi's sons; Beersheba, a wife of David; and others who are also part of the genealogy of Jesus himself.

**I am troubled when** Jesus said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" and "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs"? He said. Children meaning the Jews, dog meaning Canaanites, bread meaning the blessing of healing and restoration. Was this a case of Jesus' prejudices as a Jewish man? These words echo the voices of the religious, the Pharisees, whom Jesus had been arguing with over the interpretation of the law in the last few verses. Besides, merely being seen with the Canaanite woman would definitely be a violation of the law.

What was at the heart of God who sent Jesus only to Israel? It is certainly not saying his salvation is only for the Jews. Jesus healed other Gentiles, and they came to faith. At the end, in Matthew 28:16, after the resurrection, Jesus sent his disciples to go into all nations, make disciples, baptize them and teach them to obey God. In Isaiah 56, we read this morning reminds us that God's salvation is for all people, even Gentiles and those who are marginalised and outcast.

So, what does this story tell us? How are we to read such a troubling text?

Firstly, it seems the woman already knew Jesus. She cries out to Jesus, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!" The name "Son of David" is known for the Messiah, who is also the only one with God's authority to show mercy and restore life. As a Canaanite, she knew that somehow. Maybe she was a believer. After all, she is not in the temple of Baal or of Eshmun, the Canaanite god of healing. Instead, she came to Jesus.

Secondly, whether she was standing far away or outside the house, she eventually comes and kneels before him. Kneeling is a gesture of worship or prayer, and maybe she knelt to worship Jesus. She says, "Lord, help me." Which is in Greek, "Kyrie, botha me", And earlier she said "Lord, have mercy" which, is "Kyrie, eleison." We sang this morning.

Matthew tells us Jesus did not answer a word. Jesus remained silent, even when his disciples urged him to send her away. One of the commentators says, "Silence can be a deliberate test in which a display of persistent faith takes place." A quiet pause that draws near, moving her from shouting to the place of kneeling and praying.

Thirdly, perhaps it is true that it is difficult to know what's going on in this story without being there to see; Jesus and his expressions and the tone of his voice. Maybe Jesus' tone wasn't as harsh as his words. Maybe, just maybe, Jesus was testing this woman to see how sincere her faith was.

And probably it is true that in those days they, Jews and Gentiles, knew what they thought of each other, and that to Jews, Canaanites were like dogs, derogatory and offensive, yes, but was not unexpected;

But there is no sign of offence in this woman, even when Jesus compares her to a family dog, the last in the pecking order. She did not sound like someone who saw herself as equal to Jesus. By recognising Jesus as the Messiah, she became completely humble. Completely trusting in God's mercy.

Lastly, if this were a test, she passed with flying colours. If this was just an encounter between Jesus and a Gentile woman, Jesus would have been pleasantly surprised to find such faith in her. Impressed by her humility and great trust, Jesus said, "Woman, you have great faith; your request is granted."

What a contrast to Peter from last week, when Jesus said to Peter, after rescuing him from drowning in the sea, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

And so the point I made last week is that Proximity to Jesus does not guarantee true faith; only a humble, repentant, and trusting heart. Again, through this story, we can also say proximity to God does not guarantee true faith; only a persistent, humble and true heart with complete trust in Jesus, the power of God.

So how does this story speak to us in our own context?

Not sure how long her daughter suffered; that must have been extremely difficult. And some of us know how that feels.

She must have come to Jesus on that day, fully aware of the cultural barriers and uncertainty, even for her own safety, for she had never met him before. But she had faith, the persistent faith in the Messiah, who has the power of God, the only one who can help her and her daughter.

Let this story speak to you. Come to Jesus in humility and trust that, no matter who we are or how limited we are, God, who is faithful and has power to do all things, will bless us in all that we ask in faith. Come to pray, come to the silent contemplation. Let the Spirit of God move us and transform our cries into praise. Come to God with persistent, Humble, and complete trust in the power of Jesus and the power of God. Amen.

