



A Canaanite Woman, Dogs and Gentiles in General

TEXT
Matthew 15:21–28;
28:16–20

October 15, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples to go into all the nations and teach them about the Messiah. It's a global view of grace. Everyone is included. That's where the gospel ends, but evidently that is not where Jesus started. Along the way, he changed his mind.

This is one of the most disturbing, most surprising, most hopeful moments in the ministry of Jesus. He goes to the region of Tyre and Sidon. I don't know why he was there. It's northwest of Galilee, deep in Gentile country.

I don't know why he was there, but I know who he met there. There he is met, more like accosted, by a woman whose child is in trouble. *Help me*, she shrieks. *Help my child*. We are told she is a Canaanite woman ... a Gentile ... a Gentile with history. The Israelites and Canaanites had been enemies once upon a time. But that doesn't matter to her. *Help my baby*.

Jesus, who seemed to excel in seeing the lost and the lonely, the forgotten and those passed by, ignores her. He responds to her plea with silence.

But a mother with a child in need is a force, and she will not

give up. Jesus' disciples want her to go away. They may even be willing for him to do what she asks; just send her away.

Then Jesus says, "I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Uh oh! She's not from Israel. But that didn't stop her. She kneels before him and begs for help.

"You don't understand," he says. "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Oh my.

So, first this is a theological statement. Jesus is claiming to be the Messiah. *Messiah* is a term in Jewish faith that speaks of a ruler or a leader, at least. It speaks of one who will make things right — one who will come and enrich life. But it was assumed, believed, that the Messiah would benefit the Jews. That's what Jesus says. "I have come for the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

This woman is not Jewish. There is no grace for her. She is not among the chosen ones.

It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. Like that old *Seinfeld* episode, Jesus says, "No soup for you."

It is a theological statement, but it is also a racist statement. It's hard to think of Jesus speaking to this desperate mother and

calling her a dog, but that's what he does. Some have said, "Well, it's not really a dog ... the word is for a household pet. You know how people are about their pets. It's not really a dog; he calls her a puppy." If that helps you, fine. If I understand the text, what is revealed in this passage is the universal struggle with racism.

I was born in 1960. The civil rights movement was in full swing, and I grew up in a household that was very clear that you should be able to sit on the bus anywhere you wanted. You should be able to eat in any restaurant you wanted. You should be able to live in any neighborhood you wanted.

These were the presenting issues of racism in the 1960s. I was naïve to assume that since I was progressive on these issues, I was not racist. I was naïve to assume that if I didn't use certain repulsive vocabulary, I wasn't racist. I was naïve to assume that with a little effort, we could get a few laws passed and our systems would serve liberty and justice for all.

My country has taught me differently, and I no longer believe that.

If racism is something that Jesus had to battle, then you and I must battle the same. *It's not*

right to give the children's bread to the dogs. He can't say that unless he thinks some people are children and some are less than children.

There is a renewed conversation about race in this country. It has caught us by surprise. We seem to be realizing that problems we thought were dealt with a generation ago are very much present today. Perhaps this is because we have been casual about the power of racism in everyone ... even in Jesus.

And if I understand this text, this unnamed, persistent, annoying, relentless, screeching Canaanite woman becomes Jesus' teacher. "You can't give the children's bread to the dogs," he says.

She doesn't respond with outrage or offense. She meets Jesus in his worldview, and she schools him. She says, "Yes, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the children's table."

And Jesus says, "Great is your faith!" But I wouldn't be surprised if before he says this, there was a moment, a pause, a change in expression on Jesus' face as this sinks in. And I wonder if he thinks, *I have never thought of that before. Maybe there is enough grace to spill from the table and include you. Maybe the love of God does include you in the same way it includes everyone else.* He learns this from the unnamed Canaanite woman. She is his teacher.

Now I know, we tend to think that Jesus was born knowing everything — how to program an iPhone, how many miles are in a light-year. But I think the scripture reveals that Jesus learns. As

Luke says of Jesus' childhood, "He increased in wisdom and in years."¹ Like any and every human being, he learns. She is his teacher.

Sometimes learning can be fun, and sometimes it can pull the rug out from under you.

I suppose our Sarah was two or three, I guess. She was in those days when she truly believed that Daddy could fix anything. Anything in the world gone wrong, Daddy could fix it.

She's playing there on the floor with her little doll, singing lullabies in foreign tongues. She had a doll, plastic type. The arm comes off. "Uh-oh," she says. This one word, "Uh-oh," covers about 80 percent of her activity at the time. "Uh-oh Daddy, it's broken."

"That's all right, Daddy will fix it." I pop the arm back in place. Magic!

One day a thunderstorm came. It was one of those afternoon monsters. The power went out. Everything went dark and quiet. Sarah says, "Uh-oh, the house is broken."

"It's all right, Sarah. Don't worry." A few minutes later, the power returns. The lights come on, the ceiling fans spin, the refrigerator hums. And she says, "Yeah, Daddy fixed it. Yeah, Daddy fixed it." I saw no need to challenge her view of reality. That day came soon enough. She learned soon enough that Daddy can't fix everything. Daddy can't make everything right. Sometimes the process of learning can be jarring.

Ultimately, this text is not about racism; this is a story about

religion that is too small. Jesus assumed the Messiah was just for the Jews. She shows him that is too small. In time, he would tell his disciples to go among the Gentiles, among all the nations, because grace has a global view.

We are always learning that. In 1633, Galileo pulled the rug out from under his good friend Pope Urban VIII. Galileo shared what he learned by looking through his telescope. The earth revolved around the sun. This is actually a solar system. The night sky doesn't revolve around the earth. The earth revolves around the sun.

"That can't be," said church leaders. The scripture says otherwise. "The Lord has established the earth; it shall never be moved." (Psalm 93:1)

"The sun rises and the sun sets and returns to its place." (Ecclesiastes 1:5)

"The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved." (Psalm 96:10)

Why was this so hard for the church? Because Galileo taught us that we were reading scripture too small. Our faith was too small. Our religion was too small.

If we are fortunate, and if we pay attention, we too will have teachers who will show us that our faith needs to grow. We all need to grow in years and wisdom.

Now it is easy to talk today about how they should have grown in 1633 or 1833 or even 1933, but to name how we should grow in 2017 is a bit harder. I'm not sure how to name that, but to say that, we should assume

our faith is too small, and our practice of religion needs to grow.

Let me tell you one place I am growing. May I do that?

Walter Wangerin was a pastor, and he tells of ministry in his first church. He said, "I arrived to learn that the organist, a woman who had been on the organ bench longer than I had been alive, was dying of cancer. I went to visit her. I didn't know what to say, so I said everything.

"Once I entered chatting and covering my anxiety with noise. I spoke of the tulips and soft grass. I spoke of the birds singing and the singing we had done in worship and imagined the day she might return to the organ bench. She turned a black eye at me and held up a bony finger and said, 'Walter, shut up.'

"I did shut up," he said. "In all my words, I had been covering up the dignity of her dance with death. I visited again, but said nothing. I sat all afternoon until the shadows stretched across the floor, and with the shadows came the spirit and I spoke the words given to me: 'I love you.'

"She said, 'I love you.'"² That's all that needed to be said.

Why do I tell you that? I grew up going to church. I was carried to Sunday school before I could walk. I learned *Holy, Holy, Holy* and *Come, Christians, Join to Sing* when I was still young enough to stand on the pew while we sang it.

In college, I became fascinated by the thought of religious studies. It made sense to me. In seminary, the study of scripture

came alive, and this book became the lens through which I saw my world; it still is. But my faith was too small.

Earlier in my ministry, like Walter Wangerin, I thought my calling was to provide answers from my studies. I thought that being a Christian was a matter of getting your theology straight. But I have learned that that is too small. My theology needed to be stretched; my faith needed to grow. Because what I had done was reduce discipleship to a matter of intellect. I had reduced faith to a philosophy, a thought experience. Jesus was in my head, but not in my relationships.

But I had some good teachers who showed me otherwise — most of them here.

I was taught by Jackie Boggs, who with lifeless legs would swing herself into this choir loft to sing praise to her creator.

I have been taught by John Hall, delivering babies in Kenya. I hope to meet that child in the spring.

I was taught by Jennifer Kieltyka, who taught 2-year-olds in these back hallways for 30 years.

I was taught by Toni Diehl, who lived every moment as a servant.

I was taught this week by Carol, who volunteers at the food pantry and said it's not sharing the food so much as it is sharing the conversations that matter.

I am taught by folks who give a rainy Saturday night to walk and talk and pray with immigrants in our community so that this might not be an issue but a relationship.

I could list a thousand others who have taught me that being a disciple of Jesus Christ means love of God and neighbor is not just our doctrine; it is also our practice, and this love has a global view.

We have to learn this over and over and over again. Jesus learned it.

There was a woman who came to Jesus. I wish I could tell you her name. She was a Canaanite woman. She was a mother pleading for her child.

I am the Messiah, Jesus said. *I'm sorry I can't help you.*

But you are God's Messiah, she said, *and we are all God's children.*

He realized she was right, and before long he taught his followers that every single person in every nation was a child of God. They all are included in God's love. No one is left out.

So how do we do that? Just learn to say, "I love you." And then live like we know that is what we are created to do.

¹Luke 2:52

²I heard this from Rev. Tom Currie, III, who delivered the Tom Currie Lectures at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in January 2010.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.