

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Matthew 15:21-28

Sermon Title: "Not Just a One-time Thing" (A Journey through Matthew)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

June 30, 2013

The story of the Syrophenician woman has always been a troubling story for readers. It isn't what happens in the beginning that is troublesome or even what happens at the end, but what happens in the middle: the way that Jesus seems to deal with a person in need.

Let us start with Matthew introducing us to a Canaanite woman. Matthew calls her Canaanite, while Mark calls her Syrophenician. This woman belongs to a group of people who are cursed. The man himself, Canaan, was the son of Ham who was the son of Noah. We remember the story of Noah building an ark, and putting his family inside, and collecting a whole bunch of animals. We know that the people and animals survived the floodwaters, but do we remember what happened after the waters receded? Noah planted a vineyard, and he decided to sample the fruit of his labor, and he got drunk.¹ He was so smashed that he left his tent flap open and, well, he wasn't fully

¹ Cf. Genesis 9:18-28.

dressed. He “lay uncovered in his tent.” Noah’s two sons, Shem and Japheth, shielded their eyes and covered their father. But before this, Noah’s son Ham saw him naked, which is something you aren’t allowed to do. Noah found out and got really angry. “Curse be Canaan [cursed be the son of Ham], the lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.” Noah cursed his grandson to be the lowest of the low, and even during Jesus’ time, the Canaanites were still viewed as scum.

And now a Canaanite woman comes to Jesus, asking a favor, and it seems that Jesus is disgusted. It seems that he is remembering the curse of Noah on his grandson Canaan, and how that curse has carried over from generation to generation. This woman is a living curse by what one of her distant ancestors did. It isn’t her fault, but she has to live with it.

She asks Jesus for a healing, but isn’t the one who is sick. It’s her daughter. The daughter is dealing with a demon possession, which is nasty business. Demons can make people unable to speak, demons can make them live among tombs, and demons can throw them into fires.² Jesus has dealt with demons before. He tells them to shut up, gets their names, and commands them to leave people alone. It works

² Matthew 9:33, Luke 8:27-30, Matthew 17:14-16, respectively.

all the time. A Canaanite woman approaches Jesus with a problem that her daughter is facing, and that should be no problem. Say the word, and she would be healed.

But it's the way Jesus seems to deal with this person. She is Canaanite – the daughter is Canaanite. They are the outsiders of all outsiders. How dare they think Jesus could do anything for them?

Jesus doesn't speak to her at first. He ignores her shouting.³ The disciples want Jesus to send her away. It is as though Jesus agrees with them: that he hopes the woman will just go away. Jesus then says that he has only come to the world to help the lost sheep of Israel. It seems like he has no time to waste on non-Jewish people, let alone on cursed Canaanite people. He can't do anything for her.

She then kneels down in front of Jesus and says that she really does need help. He replies, "It is not good to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." Again, it seems as though Jesus is disgusted and refuses to help this annoying person. Usually when sick people came up to Jesus, it was the religious leaders who would be offended. They would offer disgusted looks and make caustic comments: "He

³ Matthew 15:23.

eats with sinners; he is in league with the devil.” Jesus would heal the sick nonetheless, because he would welcome anybody to approach him. He refused nobody any help. Things seems different in Matthew 15.

It isn't until the Canaanite woman hits Jesus with some wit that he chooses to help her. She says something witty like, “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table,” and then Jesus' eyes seem to open. Some readers say that Jesus learns something about Canaanite people that day: they aren't so cursed after all. Readers say that Jesus learns that non-Jewish people are just as important as Jewish people, and that women are just as important as men. Readers want to say that Jesus finally clued in and helped, all because a woman got the best of him.

Those conclusions are just as troubling as how Jesus seems to deal with a foreign woman. It sounds as though Jesus is clueless. He is the Son of God with all power and glory in his hands, but for one moment he sounds like he doesn't know how to handle one person's simple request. The disciples always had problems dealing with people in the Gospels, but not Jesus. Jesus has compassion for people – he knows

what to do.

So with this in mind, I think that by focusing too much on the way Jesus seems to handle a woman with contempt, we miss what is going on in the woman herself. We need to focus on the woman, a desperate woman who is caught in a pagan world, trying to find help for her deathly sick daughter, trying to expand her understanding, expand her faith, and accept what Jesus has to offer her.

Notice that Jesus chooses to visit the region of Tyre and Sidon. He doesn't happen to come by these two cities – he goes there for a reason. He is now in Paganland; he is now in enemy territory. And to emphasize the point, Matthew tells us that a Canaanite woman approaches Jesus. The word *Canaanite* to a Hebrew means, “Danger, Danger, Will Robinson. All hands to battle stations.” No good Jews would venture into Paganland and speak with Canaanite people, for fear of losing his or her faith.⁴ However, Jesus will. He has nothing to lose and anything to win for others, namely a Canaanite woman.

Also notice that the woman approaching Jesus is not a believer of Jesus. She is a woman who could pick any ole god she wishes to worship. The all-you-can-eat buffet is open for business in the pagan world.

⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: Volume 2, The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*, cf. 551.

She shouts out to Jesus, calling him “Lord” and “Son of David,” but does she mean it? Does she understand who Jesus really is? Is he God’s Son or just one god to choose from many?

You might hear a friend say, “O, thank you, dear Lord,” but do they mean it? Are they just using God’s name as a catchphrase, or do they really mean that God is the center of their lives and the source of all their good? Even those who actively worship God and actively pray and study and serve have to watch not to turn God’s name into a catchphrase, a magical incantation. If the Canaanite woman really wants Jesus’ help, she is going to get more than she bargained for. Jesus is not just some God among many; he is the Son of God, one with the Father and Holy Spirit.

Which is also to say that Jesus is not going to heal her daughter and then just let the mother go on her way. Jesus is not going to reveal himself as the Son of God, and allow a Canaanite to return to her pagan ways. Jesus means to heal the daughter from a demon possession and then transform her life. He means to restore her entire body from sin, and give that daughter the chance to worship the one true God and enjoy that God forever. The same goes for the Canaanite woman, shouting at Jesus, calling him all

sorts of impressive names. She will get what she asks for, but she will not be the same as she was.

Jesus ignores the woman. I believe it is a test. Does she see Jesus as a god among gods, or is he more? She is persistent and falls down on her knees. An act of respect – an act of worship. Her faith is coming out. She believes Jesus is more than a healer. She is willing to explore the idea, the truth, that Jesus is God in the flesh.

And then Jesus hits her with an offensive statement: “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs.” Jesus is not putting the woman in her place. He is stating a cultural fact that she knows full well. There is a Christian author who believes that Jesus was smiling at the woman. They are in cahoots, on the same page, understanding each other. The “smile on Jesus’ face and the compassion in his eyes robbed the words of all insult and bitterness.”⁵ The woman knows people treat her like a dog, because of her Canaanite heritage. They may treat her like a dog because of the lifestyle she lives, whatever it might be. She may not like it, but she deals with it in her own way.

⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 2*, 135.

She also knows she is a dog because of her sin. We are dogs because of our sin, or we are something worse because of our sin. It is awful how we can act. It is awful what we can come up with and make people become angry with us. It is awful how sin may destroy any good we have.

And we know we have no right to demand anything from God. We have no right to steal the blessings from God's table, and think that God is obligated to us. God could very easily leave us in our sin, because it is against God that we sin. We are ashamed and sorry, and in need of healing. We would gladly eat the crumbs that fall from God's table. We would gladly be a doorkeeper at the temple of the Lord than to live comfortably in the tents of wickedness, Psalm 84 says.⁶ We would gladly do what is necessary to receive Jesus: fall to our knees, beg for mercy, show our true faith in him.

From her knees the Canaanite woman shows her faith. She acknowledges Jesus as Lord as she did before, and then she says, "Even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from the *master's* table." She calls Jesus her master. You don't call somebody master lightly. If somebody is your master, you obey that person without hesitation. You trust that person's

⁶ Psalm 84:10.

leadership without question, and believe that anything the master says or does is good, perfect, holy. You become the servant who seeks the master's guidance and approval at all times. The Canaanite woman has put aside all her gods. She is putting aside her pagan lifestyle, her sinful lifestyle. She is offering all of herself to Jesus, not just for one healing but for complete transformation.

You may have heard me say before that God is not a genie in a bottle: you rub the lamp and get three wishes. God is not a soda machine: put the quarters or dollar bills in the slot, push the button, and out pops the drink you requested. God is our way of life. God is the reason for our existence. God is an unstoppable force that wants every part of us. God would heal us of our problems, but God wants more. God wants us. Through Christ, God means to transform every part of us: our thoughts, our dreams, our desires, our cares. God would transform how we act, how we think, and how we speak. Every cell within our bodies, every strand of DNA, God wants to mold and shape and perfect.

When the Canaanite woman bowed before Christ, she was not simply accepting one healing for one time, but healing for many times over. She accepted a new

view of reality, both for her and her daughter. They accepted new patterns of thinking, they accepted new habits for living, and they were radically and irreversibly changed.⁷

God would have the same for us. God would have us look to him for everything. Not just one thing, but for everything. God would answer one prayer, yes, but God would answer all our prayers. Not according to our will but to his will, and for us to believe, trust, follow his will without question, without hesitation. God would be the center of our lives, our Master, our Savior, from this time and forevermore.

⁷ Erwin Raphael McManus, *An Unstoppable Force*, cf. 80.