

**August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

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Matthew 15:21-28

Sermon on The Canaanite Woman's Faith

Grace and peace to you on this day as we join together for worship. It is good to be gathered, near and far, to hear and maybe even struggle with this Word. To catch us up a bit we are travelling with Jesus' story through the Gospel of Matthew. A couple of weeks ago Pastor Kirstin shared the miracle of Jesus breaking bread and feeding the crowd of 5000 gathered. And last week Pastor Bobbie beautifully reminded us of Jesus calling Peter to walk on water, and how Jesus is with us, taking our hands, helping us in the storms of our lives. But this week? We are confronted with a Jesus whose compassion seems to have run out. In the Scripture Jesus not only ignores someone who asks for his help, but outright denies giving care to her. This woman is a Canaanite, a Gentile, someone who does not have the same rules and rituals as the Jewish people. She is seen as unclean and an outsider due to her ethnicity, and as a woman, probably single, with a sick child, she has a lot going against her.

I struggle with Jesus denying care to this woman, because the Jesus I want to know and love and trust in would have said from the second the woman cried out his name "Of course, my child, your daughter is healed." But what I often forget is that in Jesus' complete divinity, he was also completely human. We read in the scriptures examples of Jesus experiencing the wide range of human emotions we often feel as well. He flipped tables out of anger, he wept over the death of his friend, he cried out to God asking God to prevent his fate on the cross from happening. So maybe, in this instance, we see Jesus, exhausted from traveling, feeding, healing, and caring for those in need. And maybe, in this instance, we catch Jesus with his blinders up, narrowly looking ahead of him and only at the goal of what he was supposed to do in his ministry. Jesus says he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, the chosen people of God, the Jewish people, to teach and care for. And so maybe, in this instance, Jesus draws a line and creates a boundary for himself, not having the time or energy or willingness to add one more thing to his plate, especially for someone who by society's standards, does not belong.

This encounter with the Canaanite woman isn't classified as one of the typical "miracles" found in the Bible. But I think something miraculous does happen. This woman with the odds stacked against her persists in pursuing Jesus. She calls him Lord three times, recognizing who he is as the Messiah. She does not give up when she is ignored, but comes and kneels before Jesus. And when she is told by Jesus that what he has to give is not for her, she gently reminds him that whatever he has to give, whatever is left over, is for her too, and she will take it.

I want to believe that Christ's blinders from his eyes fall away and that something in him is awakened. Jesus has been teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven and asking people if they truly understand what this new Kingdom is all about, that it's for all and that it comes in the most unexpected of ways. But here, with the Canaanite woman, Jesus sees the Kingdom of Heaven right before his eyes. Her faith causes the boundary that Jesus had put up to be expanded. Jesus himself has to make a choice, whether to broaden his ministry to include all like he has been teaching, or to keep it closed, only to the people he thought he was supposed

to care for, the lost sheep of Israel. We see him choose to let down the line he had created, and heal the daughter of the persistent and faithful Canaanite woman. His mind and heart have been changed. He has to let go of his preconceived notions and learns through the faith of the Canaanite woman the expansive vision God is calling him into.

Now if Jesus almost misses this opportunity to extend care, I wonder how often we miss these opportunities as well. In our Following Jesus Together discussion this week we talked about times in our lives we have looked the other way from reaching out to others because of our own uncertainties of what to do or fear of leaving the comforts of what we know. I also heard stories where people stepped out of their comfort zones in order to help those in need, providing care however it was needed. They shared what they experienced and learned by opening their hearts to something new. We talked about how those experiences were usually uncomfortable, but with that discomfort came growth and new wisdom.

This past January I had the opportunity to do a short-term pastoral internship in Guyana, South America, where I worked with a few churches in the Lutheran Church there. On Saturday mornings there was a feeding program at one of the local churches, where people needing a meal would come and be fed. These people who came were typically homeless, some with obvious injuries or some differently abled, some with worn out clothes and shoes. They seemed to know the routine well, where we'd first sing and share in a devotional, and then the literal food would be passed out. There were rules on how much people could have and where people could actually receive the food. And it seemed that those who ran the program kept their distance once the food was distributed.

I felt uncomfortable. I was in a different country, unsure of how to interact with those gathered, and was one of two white people there, the other being my classmate. And as much as I wanted to be welcoming and willing to converse, I came in with my own thoughts and prejudices and assumptions. During the second week I was standing at the edge of the group gathered, close enough to respond if someone needed something but far enough away so that I felt safe. A man, sitting on the ground began talking with me, so I squatted down next to him and began to chat. I learned his name was Andrew and that he had been coming to the feeding program for years. He told me about his family in Canada and the United States, and his work of selling things such as super glue and sunglasses. He asked me why I believed in God and was thankful to see a young person like me following. He called me an angel, told me he could see a passion for God when I spoke, and he gave me a Hardy Boys book, one that he normally would sell as part of his livelihood.

That morning the blinders around my eyes came down, and the barriers I had created between myself and those gathered at the feeding program were broken away. I saw someone looking to be fed, with literal food as well as in the form of conversation and building a relationship. If I had stayed inside the church or ignored the man's questions, I would have missed a rich and beautiful conversation. This man affirmed me in my call and the gifts he witnessed from the short time he knew me. He gave me more that morning than what I'm sure I gave him. When I looked at those at the feeding program that morning, I saw the Kingdom of Heaven alive, gathered in community and around a meal, and Christ in each and every one of them.

Someone this past Tuesday in Following Jesus Together said that God is in the business of breaking boundaries and entering into new territory. As humans, we are good at limiting ourselves in order to make sure we stay the same and safe. Sometimes we try to limit God, putting God in our neat and safe box with us. But if I've learned and witnessed anything, God cannot be limited. God is going to push the boundaries we have created until they break and our hearts cannot but help expand into and embrace the new territory God has called us into.

God was moving through the Canaanite woman to show Jesus his full calling in his ministry here on earth, that God's love was for all, including her. And I want to believe that God was moving through Andrew that morning I met him, breaking my own boundaries down and revealing to me the beauty present right in front of me, as well as where God was continuing to call me in this world. And most likely, God is calling you to step over a line or a limit or an excuse you created for yourself. This world is full of people on their knees like the Canaanite woman, desperate to be heard, to receive help and healing, to break free from the things of this world that keep them bound. I'm going to trust that if Jesus Christ is able to have his mind changed and his heart expanded, then just maybe mine and yours can as well. And once that happens, there is fortunately, no going back. So take a risk, remove the blinders from your eyes, and take a step over your homemade line, trusting that God's love is with you and for you and is going to break the line anyway. There is nothing to lose except the ways in which you were limiting yourself, and everything to gain when you see Christ in the eyes of those waiting for you.