

<i>Date Preached</i>	16-Aug-2020	<i>Date Initiated</i>	05-Aug-2020
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Prop 15, Yr A (Tr 2)
<i>Main Text</i>	Mt 15:21-28 (Canaanite woman)		

Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."



Two weeks ago, we explored the overall arc—and the perfection—of God’s plan for the whole of creation, and last week, we took a closer look at our role in that plan, through the lens of the disciples’ responses to Jesus. This week, I’d like us to think for a bit about God’s plan for the *rest* of the world; for those who are not among us in the Church, with a capital *c*, but are nevertheless, through Christ, within God’s saving intent for the whole world.

** ** *

Let’s start by just putting it out there: Today’s Gospel lesson is tough to hear. In the first half, Jesus comes across as perhaps a little earthy, even a little scatological—that’s without the initial *e!*—and in the second half, as a downright bully. This Jesus makes us uncomfortable not just by what He teaches (which isn’t that uncommon), but also by the rough way He treats others (which *is*). Indeed, some commentators have suggested that one way around this Jesus is to say that Matthew (or some later editor) made Him up; that today’s Gospel lesson isn’t authentic, and thus we don’t have to pay much attention to the Jesus we encounter today. But in addition to being a minority view, that seems like a cop-out: Jesus isn’t any one thing or any one attitude. Because He is the union of the fully divine and the fully human, it should not surprise us that He does not always comport with our frail human expectations.

Because they contain pointers, I believe, to the thrust of Jesus’ message in today’s lesson, let’s briefly consider the other lessons appointed for this day:

- In Isaiah, as he was two weeks ago, the prophet is foretelling the re-establishment ... the reconstruction ... of Israel after its captivity in Babylon. And as the messenger of God, he makes an unusual assertion: The community of Israel—the People of God—will come to include not just those who have historically been counted as members, but also all matter of foreigners; strangers to the faith; and even (in verses omitted from our lesson) eunuchs, long regarded in ancient culture as damaged people and thus impure and unworthy of the Kingdom of God. Whoever chooses Me, God tells Israel, you will include, because *I* have already chosen *them*.
- And Paul. Oh, how I want to offer a long-term study of the Letter to the Romans, for St Paul packs so much into every single sentence. (If you’re interested, let me know some time.) In any event, in today’s lesson, Paul comes to a crux of his message to the new Jewish-*hyphen*-Christians in Rome: Do not count yourselves as better than or any more favored by God than those Jews who do not accept Jesus as the Messiah, for God’s plan continues: They have laid the groundwork for your salvation, my Roman friends, and you, ultimately, will lay the

groundwork for theirs. In God, all members of the human family walk together, whether or not they know it, on the pathway toward grace.

So, against this backdrop of non-Israelites becoming members of Israel (in Isaiah) and the interdependence of Jews and Christians in achieving God's salvation (in Romans), what are we to make of the tetchy, gruff Jesus we encounter in Matthew? What Jesus makes abundantly clear in the first part of this lesson is that heart trumps ritual: Ethics (how we act) matter far, far more than the beliefs we espouse or the personal practices we keep. Purity of belief and purity of person are empty and meaningless unless engender love. Legalism and moral persnickety-ness are mere disguises—if not forms of self-deception—in which we hide ourselves, unless they change our hearts; unless they cause us to love, honor and uphold others.

OK, Jesus, so why don't *You* practice what *You've* just *preached*? Why is your *very next act* to ignore a woman and her daughter who are in dire distress and calling upon *You* to help them? And then to haughtily remark that she's not a member of the group *You* were sent to save? And *then* to call her a "little dog"? Is this any way to love, honor and uphold?

We might, on the one hand, try to explain away all of Jesus' rudeness and gruff behavior as products of the culture He lived in—as His being somehow true to His times, when women were not respected; public outbursts were frowned upon; and "dog" was an epithet Jews commonly applied to Canaanites—believers in other gods whose historical lands God had awarded to the Israelites centuries before. On the other hand, we cannot fail to notice how the Canaanite woman *responds* to Jesus' discriminatory, dehumanizing treatment. She refuses to be brushed aside, whatever status human society may have assigned her; she will not let up until Jesus has heard her personally, rather than dismissing her as a stereotype. Further, the more Jesus pushes her away, the closer she draws to Him, finally making a heartfelt, full throated expression of her faith in Him: You may say, she says from her knees, that I am not among the people *You* came to save, but I know that the smallest crumb of *Your* grace ... the merest glance of *Your* eyes or word passing from *Your* lips ... means the difference between wretchedness and soundness; between emptiness and wholeness ... death and life.

Could it be, then, that the real teacher in this lesson—the person Jesus intends us to keep our eyes on—is not Jesus Himself, but the Canaanite woman? For though she carries none of the outward cultural trappings of acceptable religious belief ... her heart brims with humility and her words with hope. She lives a Jesus-centered life even though she has never set foot in a synagogue or read a word of the Torah. Her faith *is* ... truly great.

** ** *

What, then, are we to make of this difficult but powerful lesson? Two points come to my mind. First, as Christ's disciples, our mission is less seeking to put Christ *into* the hearts of those outside the Church and more discovering Him already at work *within* them. As this country increasingly turns to the painful but necessary work of tearing down the hateful *-isms* that foment prejudice and division, the Church has work to do in this space, as well. While ritual and creed and doctrine are essential for forming and holding us together as a particular organ in the Body of Christ, they are not metrics of worthiness or badges of chosen-ness; they are *aids*, not ends. The Church is not the fortress of the pure, erected to keep out the infidel or the unwashed. There is no *us* and *them*, but only Him. The Church is an outpost from which we venture to discover *more* of Christ at work in the world. We must take the Christ we grow to know through the sound teachings

and helpful practices of the Church ... and come to see the *exact same* Christ dwelling in the people *outside* the Church who work for the values of Christ ... *and* those who, like the Canaanite woman, demand such values for themselves. Those people may not eat the same food we eat [*gesture to altar*], but they are fed by the same Spirit.

Second, though it may discomfit us Episcopalians, we must acknowledge that doing the work of Christ is not always pretty; is not always decorous and polite. In today's lesson, we find no arbiter of etiquette in either the Canaanite woman, with her shouting and insistence; her defying just about every cultural norm there is ... *or* in Jesus, with His dismissive attitude and disparaging, even cruel remarks. And yet, by the end of their interaction, a new disciple has come to faith and receives the blessing of Jesus' abundant love.

Saint Paul writes convincingly that the genesis of God's mercy lies in disobedience. And so, too, ... at least some of the time ... must the mercy we show in God's name. It cannot always be seemly; cannot be restricted only to the docile and deserving. Our mercy must transcend our comfort zone and encompass those who run counter to those norms that run counter to Christ—however their brashness or insistence may make us cringe. Our mercy must side boldly with those whom society has harshly condemned to no-worth and no-hope. Our mercy must extend to those we think we would never associate with ... until we realize they are the only ones Jesus ever really did. [*gathering up:*] The mercy in us —the mercy of God that the Spirit stirs up—must seek out and find Christ in those who may not (and may not want to) profess Him with words ... but who live Him in both their deeds and their demands. For it is then that Christ rejoices and says to us, as He said to the Canaanite woman, “Great is your faith!”

