



Sermon TUMC – July 9, 2017
Matthew 15:21-28¹

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(This was an interactive sermon, any comments from the floor are summarized in the yellow highlights)

Nevertheless she persisted: Encountering the Story of the Canaanite Woman

I am fascinated by this particular Bible story. Learning it and learning about it has been a very enriching experience ever since I started noticing it and trying to learn it by heart. I once had an opportunity as part of a workshop to put this story into a tweet (140 characters or less)², maybe you'd like to try it.

I've been living with this story for a long time. This week, preparing for the sermon I read a lot and I've figured out that this story is the source of a lot of controversy in the Biblical Studies world because we don't know quite what to do with it because it can be looked at from so many different angles. I also found that some writers (especially online) can become quite inflamed by interpretations that are different from their own perspective. (In my readings this week, I can honestly say that it was the first time that I found the word "poophead" in a theological article!³) People get pretty worked up!

In keeping with our Summer Series "Dangerous Liaisons: stories of mutual conversion," this is about a story of encounter between Jesus and this "Canaanite" mother who will clearly do anything to help her daughter who is tormented. It's also a story about Jesus apparently changing his mind, after possibly being very rude. It's a head-scratcher, because it's hard to imagine why a gospel writer would include a story that casts Jesus in such an unfavourable light.⁴ Some people take that as evidence that it actually happened.

Joanna Dewey (Biblical Scholar) says the following⁵ "The narrative portrays Jesus being bested by a woman, and changing his behavior on that account. This is the only instance in the extant tradition, of Jesus being *taught* by someone, and that someone is a woman who should not properly be speaking to him at all. As a result of her speech, Jesus ignores the fundamental boundary between Jew and Gentile."

¹ Image taken from The Great Canadian Bible Study 2012, Canadian Baptist Women

² "Jesus, schooled by the Canaanite woman."

³ <https://www.umass.edu/wsp/alpha/iliad/syrophenician.html>

⁴ "It is hard to imagine why the church at any stage of its development would want to present the Christ it confesses in such a light!" (from *A Gentile Woman's Story*, Sharon H. Ringe, *From Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Editor Letty M. Russell Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1985 <http://www.womenpriests.org/classic/ringe.asp>)

⁵ In: Frances Taylor Gench, *Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004

Now, I've studied theology – on purpose! – and I love speculating on all of this stuff. Why did Matthew write the same story differently than Mark? Was there something in here for the listeners in the early Christian church?

Why is it placed in the Matthew gospel narrative between two stories of Jesus feeding thousands of people? (Does that have something to do with the breadcrumbs that the woman refers to?)

In the gospel of Matthew, why is it placed right after a story where Jesus argues with the Pharisees about things that are ritually clean and ritually unclean? He talks about things coming out of your mouth being unclean and then something strange comes out of his own mouth.

Did Jesus really call her a dog? A was it a pet dog or a little dog – yes hey argue about this? Was it offensive either way even if he didn't mean it to be?

Who was this woman? Was she rich? Was she poor? Was she urban? Was she rural? Does it matter?

Where was the daughter and what does it mean to be tormented by a devil?

All these questions are in the text.

But for a sermon, when we bring it here before the gathered community, one must always ask the question of “so what”? How is this relevant to our context? What might God be able to tell us here at TUMC through our reading of this narrative together today?

Rather than going into a length how Jesus and the woman changed each other, the “dangerous liaison” I'm inviting us to this morning is between us and the text. We're going to do a Bible study, an interactive sermon. You are going to talk, we are going to work at this together and see how it resonates in our community at this time.

Ushers to distribute Bibles

Volunteers for the part of another reading of it: Narrator, Disciples, Woman and Jesus. Try to imagine the scene, who is where and how are they moving? Re-read it (2x) try to do it differently the second time. There is no “right” way to read it.

The rest of us: Try to imagine the scene, the geography of it, are they moving, what is the tone of voice, etc.

What stood out to you?

- The courage of the woman
- Jesus isn't immediately responsive
- It takes the disciples to bring it up to him
- There's a large gap between the end of 27 and 28 – it is there that Jesus changes his mind. Maybe it takes a bit of time for that to happen

Would any of you who have read the story, or learned it by heart be able to tell me what is Jesus' tone of voice, and what is his posture in the silence?

Is the woman pleading desperately or demanding? And what difference does that make?

What other questions did it raise for you? What do you wonder about? (Some people have made the case that Jesus was being a racist – how does that feel?)

- Was Jesus trying to transition the disciples into a different way of thinking. He was making the disciples ask for something instead of just doing it. This might be like a teaching mode, maybe he was testing to see how serious she was about her request.
- I wonder if through his conversation with the Pharisees earlier made him cocky or arrogant, so he was just not able to see. Maybe he was still in debate mode.
- There was a sense of distraction: he was going through a lot, his first point was that he had this huge goal and why were they distracting him from with something small.
- He was worked up and not paying attention.
- Maybe he was tired.
- Even if he was tired, didn't he still say something very hurtful?
 - (MR) Some of the scholars who deal with this particular question (arguing about what kind of dog it was, or was it a term of endearment) Even if he wasn't being rude, some of them question whether when someone comes to ask for help is the right moment to test them or to get into a philosophical argument.
- "I thought of walking down King Street and so many people, crowds, trying to sell gym memberships and so on, it's so hard to pay attention to everyone."
- Jesus' response to the disciples doesn't mesh with anything Jesus said before. Maybe Jesus is mirroring back to the disciples the kind of thinking they would have had about limits they of his ministry.
 - (MR) Apparently in Greek, it is not clear whether the word the disciples use and what their attitude was. Are they saying "get rid of her" or "have mercy on her." It can be a request to get her off their backs, or a plea to Jesus to save her.

There is another **version** in Mark 7:28-30. It is largely accepted that the gospel of Mark was written first and used as a basis for the gospel of Matthew and Luke. So the author of Matthew probably made changes for a reason and it might mean something.

- [Trent Voth] There are many differences in this text and that's kind of fun because it gives us an opportunity to study how Matthew changes Mark.
- The story takes place in Tyre not Sidon
- In Mark it takes place in a house, not on the street
- There is no shouting that takes place
- The disciples are not present in Mark

- There is no confessional statement: Lord Have Mercy, Son of David, the woman doesn't say that – that statement on her lips is very important, because it is a Gentile woman recognizing Jesus as a Messiah, it's huge.⁶
- In Mark the woman is a Greek Sirophoenician, Matthew labels her differently
- In Matthew Jesus ignores her at first, but in Mark he seems to respond
- Mark labels it an unclean spirit, Matthew does not.
- Jesus does not mention the lost sheep of Israel in Mark, he just enters into his parable statement – it's not good to take the children's food and give it to the dogs.
- He does not tell her, "Great is your faith."
- When the woman kneels occurs at different times, in Mark it happens right at the beginning, in Matthew it happens after the interaction.
- She goes home and finds the girl healed on her bed, in Matthew we are told she's healed immediately.
- In Mark's version the woman says that the dogs still get to eat the children's crumbs, and in Matthew the crumbs fall from the Master's table. There is a different identification of who is the owner of the bread and the crumbs.

One of the things that becomes interesting about this story being between the two stories of the miracle of multiplication of the loaves, is that after both of those miracles there were leftovers, crumbs. And so, I would like to believe that the author of Matthew knew what he was doing in putting that little trail of crumbs, as it were, from one story to the other.

Clearly, one of the main stories of transformation and encounter is this story about how something that was a very Jewish-centered ministry becomes a ministry to Gentiles and non-Jews.

The other transformation is the woman. My sister used to live in Nazareth (about 10-15 years ago) and the culture there was that she was not go to any man's house without her husband being present. It was unseemly for a woman alone to interact with a man who was not her husband, if she had one he needed to be present. That's modern day. So back in the day it would have been very unseemly for this woman to approach Jesus directly and to address him directly. A lot of feminist interpreters of the Bible see this as a story of empowerment of women. As well as the Jew-Gentile boundary being broken, the man-woman boundary is being broken. And not surprisingly Jesus at first acts out his culturally-bound human maleness, he acts out of the sense that it is inappropriate for her to be talking to him.

There are many lenses to take on this. Before our time runs out, I'd like to pick up on another small detail.

⁶ "Who would have anticipated that an 'outsider'... would address Jesus with the confessional titles of early Christian communities and the languages of prayer?" (Gench)

One other interesting thing stood out to me – and I haven’t found this argument much in the literature I looked at it may not hold water, so I’m putting it out there to test it with you. The author of Matthew uses a word to describe this woman, he calls her a “Canaanite,” it’s an outdated or a loaded word.

Who were the Canaanites? They were the people that occupied the land before the promise to Abraham and Sarah⁷. They were the indigenous people who were on that land, the original occupiers of the land before Abraham and Sarah and their descendants came and left and then came back again. That is intriguing to me, the slip of the “pen” that the author of Matthew makes calling the woman an indigenous woman, or a Canaanite woman.

- Comment on the matriarchal aspect in the role of women both in Judaism and Indigenous cultures.

It’s a story of a clash. Part of what the author of Matthew is doing here in using this word is creating an “us” and “them” narrative.⁸ Canaanite in Bible times is a code word for pagan. (“The odds are good that she did not call herself a Canaanite.”⁹) So we need to pay attention to that, and pay attention to the words that we use that create those “us and them” categories, that sometimes just slip out without any intention. The idea of political correctness did not exist when this gospel was being written, they weren’t policing themselves as to how they say things, so it just slipped out of Jesus’ mouth and of the author’s pen.

Other people worry about Jesus being God and how can Jesus change his mind. Another thread that is very interesting is to see how this Gentile woman picks up on a long tradition of Jewish faith of arguing and negotiating with God. One of the scholars talks about how all the Psalms are about arguing with God. This woman is actually living out of a place and a faith that expects God to listen and to respond in a certain way.

One of the interesting questions is: **“How far would *you* go for a child of yours who is tormented?”**¹⁰ **How many boundaries would you cross? How many rules would you break?**

⁷ Amy Jill Levine, in *Women in Scripture*, Carol Meyers (ed).

⁸ (Personal detour) Back when I was recently married, my then husband and I went with my missionary parents to visit a conservative Holdeman Mennonite colony in Rio Verde, Brazil. These were people who had come to the country years before from Ohio, to settle in Brazil. One of the things that I remember best about that visit – other than the great pie and a 5 year old telling me I was naughty because I had short hair – was the look of surprise when they’d meet my Brazilian husband: “So, you married a native?”

That one word, native, revealed to me their clear sense of “us” and “them.” It didn’t feel mean or intentional on their part, but I felt there was an air of superiority in their use of that word, or in their sense of surprise that I, a Canadian, would marry anyone other than a North American. Words matter and carry power.

⁹ Richard Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew*.

¹⁰ Gench

So how is this relevant to our context? What might God be wanting to tell us here at TUMC through this narrative?

It is a story of changing assumptions. **What has it called to your mind where you need to change?**

- Encouraging us to be courageous, because God is there to listen. Jesus was there to listen and changed his mind.

It is also the courage to intercede on behalf of others. She was doing a ministry of intercession on behalf of her daughter, she was doing a ministry of teaching to Jesus in helping Jesus change his mind, or at the very least teach his disciples, depending on how you look at it.

I'd also say that we can expect wisdom from unusual sources. It doesn't always come from the person who presumably has the power, sometimes God's wisdom comes from the annoying person who does not stop asking.

- Maybe we can also learn that she was humble, but she said "I'm not a dog!"

There is much more we could talk about. I pray that this encounter with this scripture can be a blessing to us and a change in us.

In the words of Frances Gench:

"May the Canaanite woman continue to inspire in us the same boldness in prayer and persistence in faith that clings to God's promises. May the God who has drawn close to us with a human face bless us also with a saving presence. And may their mutual story help us imagine and define our own daily lives as ministry that crosses boundaries dividing the human family, so that we too, may bear witness to the inclusive power, presence and mercy of God." Amen.

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

What is the broad structure of this narrative?

- Jesus (who is Jewish) withdrew from Galilee towards the Mediterranean. It is the only time that Jesus goes out of Palestine into gentile territory.
- A woman (who is not Jewish, a Gentile) comes out – not clear whether Jesus crossed any borders or whether she did.
- She keeps on trying to get his attention, yelling at him, calling him by his messianic title (Son of David), begging for mercy for herself because her daughter is tormented. She basically torments Jesus and the disciples.
- 1 – Silence. Jesus at first ignores her. (do they keep on walking?)
- The disciples keep asking him to do something about it – it is not clear whether they were being kind or just wanting to get rid of her, the Greek apparently makes it unclear whether they want her to be dismissed or satisfied.

- 2. Exclusion. He explains to them the parameters of his ministry as he understands it – to the lost sheep of Israel. There’s a “painful edge of exclusivism” in Jesus’ actions. (Swanson)
- The woman blocks his path and kneels in front of him – the word is worship – she worships him.
- 3. Insult. He finally addresses her with what is probably felt as an insult, comparing her request to dogs.
- She insists a forth time – breaking a Biblical narrative pattern of things coming in threes – debating him on his own terms. “She takes up Jesus’ insulting word and uses it to argue against him, subtly reshaping the metaphor to include her own need and her daughter’s within the purview of his mission.” (Gench). ¹¹
- He relents and comments her faith and grants her daughter healing. (Now might be a good time for me to tell you that the title of my sermon is “Nevertheless she persisted” I should be up front about my bias.)
- (Then what happened?)

If you were to identify with someone, who would it be? Can you think why?

“Where do the realities reflected in the text intersect with your own experience?”

Troubling image of Jesus

Sharon H. Ringe “... the church has adapted the story to its ecclesiastical needs and, more generally, how we who are the insiders of the church and the privileged of society work to *domesticate the gospel to our point of view* and to protect the Christ who is familiar and safe from the Christ who offends us.”

(Elizabeth Struthers Malbom) “The fact that Jesus’ initial response to the woman is rude and parochial bothers faithful readers who want Jesus to be a perfect model of morality and courtesy, untouched by his patriarchal culture and human nature.”¹²

The benevolent interpretations are that: Jesus was testing her faith or smiling as he said it – these “do not account for the unseemliness of such cajoling when a child is ill.” (Amy Jill Levine)

“Whatever provoked the initial response attributed to Jesus (whether we should conclude that he was tired, or in a bad mood, or even that he appears to have participated in the racism and sexism that characterized his society), it is the Gentile woman who is said to have called his bluff.”

¹¹ In the context of the gospel, there is reference to the two multiplications of bread that fed thousands and where there were leftovers. So she shifts from “frugality to abundance” in in image of the final banquet of God’s grace. (Gench)

¹² Women in Scripture (ibid)

(Richard Swanson) “The scene is painful at the beginning. The scene is perhaps painful at the end. Jesus’ actions, by the end line up with his words in the previous scene. He seems to have learned a lesson, and this requires that he be a character that is able to change.

Jewish tradition of arguing with God

The expectation that Jesus (God) does not change is not a Jewish worldview, the Bible is full of instances where folks argue with God. The Psalms are one example, other include Exodus 32:14, Genesis 8:21, Jonah 3:10, Job 42:7-17).

Gail O’Day (Surprised by Faith, in Gench)– “Matthew has shaped her words to reflect the traditional, candid speech of Jews before their God.” She expects Jesus to act like God.

“Jesus is changed by this woman’s boldness. Just as God is impinged upon by Israel’s plea so is Jesus impinged upon here. The Canaanite woman knows who Jesus is and holds him to it; she will not settle for a diminishment of the promises. She insists that Jesus be Jesus, and through her insistence she frees him to be fully who he is...”

Canaanite women

This is the third Canaanite woman to appear in Matthew: Rahab and Tamar appear in the genealogy. “All three Canaanite women overcome hesitancy of lack of initiative in Hebrew/Israelite/Jewish men. All three acknowledge (whether implicitly or explicitly) Israel’s priority in salvation history, all three achieve their goals through clever speech and action.”¹³

About being a woman

(Ringe) it was unseemly for a woman to approach a man publicly, she broke custom to approach him. Daughters were a liability, so why did she want her healed.

“But we know some other things about the particular woman in this story. Apparently she did not accept the low esteem in which her society held her daughter, or its restrictions on her own behavior. She did not hesitate to approach Jesus, and even actively to importune him. And she valued her daughter, this one fundamentally like her who was still with her, who was suffering, and whose life was precious enough to demand healing and transformation, liberation from the alien forces that appeared to have taken her over. For the sake of her daughter, the woman broke custom, went after what she needed, and stood up to this visiting rabbi and miracle worker of whom so many stories had doubtless been told. And she bested him in an argument. Finally, she got what she wanted: Her daughter was healed.”¹⁴

¹³ Levine (ibid)

¹⁴ Ringe (ibid)

Three lenses from which to look at this story¹⁵

- **Jewish-Gentile boundaries:** It was a sensitive issue for the Matthean church (inclusion of Gentiles) She's a hero for non-Jews. "Viewed from this angle of vision, the story celebrates both God's faithfulness to Israel and the power of boundary-crossing faith." Gentiles have access to healing and salvation.
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- **Gender Boundaries:** not only gentile but female. Feminist scholar Elaine Wainwright argues that "the subversive power of this story goes far beyond the traditional boundary breaking with which it is associated – namely Gentile mission. It invites the hearer to break the bonds of gender-stereotyping and bias and demand miracle in human life, particularly in female human life."

These are the first words for a woman in the gospel of Matthew and they are pronouncing that Jesus is the Messiah.

Some feminist scholars "hold up the Canaanite woman as symbolic of the struggle of women for participation within the life of the Christian community."

(Ringe) Woman in active ministry: as witness, as intercessor, and faith as active importuning. She ministers to Jesus enabling him to see things differently.

- **Socioeconomic Boundaries:** Gerd Theissen, draws attention to the fact that this woman might have had a high economic status. "Then the woman comes out from the city of Tyre [a maritime trading city] and encounters a rural itinerant preacher from the Galilee backwaters, two very different socioeconomic worlds collide. Indeed, Theissen finds in Jesus' harsh response to her a reflection of the bitter relationships between Jews and Gentiles in the border regions between Tyre and Galilee and urban-rural tensions." Tyre depended on the agricultural production of the Galilee region.
- **Colonial readings:** there are also interesting analyses of the socio-political power dimensions and debates on whether and how this text reinforces patriarchy and colonial mindsets noted in Gench.

¹⁵ Gench (ibid)