

12th Sunday after Pentecost A 20 August 2023

Matthew 15:21-28

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith!' Let's pray: ...

Christianity has always adapted to changing circumstances, cultures, and traditions. Its success worldwide boils down to its inherent ability to change and adapt to new cultures and traditions.

Ultimately, God is all about change. God is willing to meet people where they're at, with the understanding that they have, and transform those concepts. One of the most remarkable examples is the commandment to have "no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). The early Israelites believed in the existence of gods other than Yahweh. They may have had a less than ideal understanding of God, but God was willing to accept them as being valid starting points in their understanding of his true nature. God then nurtured the Jews in their faithfulness, gradually opening their minds and hearts to the truth.

Today I want to suggest that Jesus' life was characterised by change just as our lives are. That may seem surprising, but everyone acknowledges that Jesus changed to some extent. (Philippians 2) emphasises that Jesus had to give up his divinity in order to lower himself and become a human being, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" [:6-8]. As Jesus grew, he changed physically, emotionally, and in spiritual awareness. Today's gospel reading exemplifies this intensely, where a Canaanite woman's faith causes Jesus to change his mind.

Our passage begins with Jesus going "to the district of Tyre and Sidon" where he runs into a "Canaanite woman ..."

After a busy schedule of preaching and healing, Jesus goes to a place in Phoenicia, or a part of modern-day Lebanon. This is pagan land outside the territory of Israel. His situation escalates as he's confronted by an anxious woman desperate to help her child. And she's a Canaanite.

The Canaanites were the descendants of Ham, one of Noah's three sons. Scripture says that Ham and all his descendants were cursed and destined to be slaves because it was wrong for a son to see his father naked (Genesis 9:18-28). They were the people, among others, whom God wanted to "blot out" (Exodus 23:23) in order for the Israelites to inhabit the land.

This person is also a woman. Jewish tradition forbade women from having casual conversation with a strange man, particularly a religious man. But here we have a brazen woman boldly approaching Jesus.

Not only is this stranger an unescorted Canaanite woman, she has a daughter who is possessed by a demon. Now, although her behaviour may be shocking, her theology is superb: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David ..." She addresses Jesus by the title used by all true believers "Lord, Son of David ..." This woman knows exactly who Jesus is and what she wants, but Jesus seems to need time to assess the whole situation. He doesn't answer her immediately. Jesus seems to be puzzled. Here's Jesus in the land of notorious pagans, presented with a troubling request, by a Canaanite woman, in front of his disciples who just want her to scram.

The disciples want Jesus to get rid of this pesky woman quickly to put an end to her embarrassing presence. They speak more out of self-interest and convenience rather than being motivated by love, concern, and compassion for fellow human beings.

At this point, Jesus says the first of two things that will puzzle us to the end of the age, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Much of the commentary on this text suggests that Jesus was probably testing this woman. That Jesus could foresee the whole path of Christian history, and the time for expansion to the Gentiles hadn't yet come.

But I want to challenge this understanding of Jesus. I don't contest that Jesus was always focused on kingdom imperatives, but I can't ignore the fact that Jesus was truly human. And being so, he was subject to the same human influences and traditions that the rest of us are. My view is heavily influenced by a couple of verses from Hebrews:

First, from [Hebrews 2] we read, "but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone ..." [:9] Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are tested" [:17,18].

Then in [Hebrews 4] we hear, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" [:15].

I'm convinced that Jesus set aside his divinity in order to truly become like us. Jesus could only be our effective high priest by emptying himself.

Jesus was raised in an exclusive community and religion where clear lines of division were well-entrenched. The Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Zealots, and the Essenes were very exclusive in nature. Only the chosen few could belong to them. This was Jesus' lived experience. So, it was only natural for him to reflect the traditions and teachings of his upbringing.

Like Jesus, we too have been shaped by many faulty traditions. But for those of us who claim to know that Jesus is Lord, our prejudices must give way to merciful action. Jesus is an exemplary ambassador of his tradition, but he shows us today that even deeply held traditions must ultimately serve the command to love God and love others as ourselves.

The woman could easily have given up and walked away disappointed. But she had bold faith. She wouldn't take "No" for an answer.

But then comes Jesus' second rebuttal, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" [:26]. What do you do with that?!? Scholars trip over themselves trying to soften this seemingly uncharacteristic behaviour by Jesus, but looking at the plain sense of the text, it's clear that Jesus is trying to find a reason not to deal with this woman.

But the woman replies, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Boom! In the face of Jesus' cutting remark the woman retorts with brilliant theological insight.

This Syrophenician woman latches onto the thrust of Jesus' argument and turns it to her advantage. By using uncanny wit, comedic timing, deep humility, and faithfulness, the woman masterfully engineers an irrefutable reason for Jesus to grant her the healing she seeks.

She doesn't dispute her status as second fiddle behind Israel. Instead, she humbly acknowledges her position. But her clever use of Jesus' own image demonstrates to him that there's still a way that she might receive a portion of God's bread. She both acknowledges the primacy of the children of Israel and asserts that there remains a place at the table for her as well.

Our passage ends with, "'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly."

Jesus is clearly impressed and inspired by this Gentile woman's tenacity and vision. He's now able to see how the table of God set before Israel may be extended to invite a far more inclusive group of diners.

I think Jesus learnt something from the Canaanite woman. She expanded his awareness of what even the dogs under the table needed to eat. She challenged him and stretched him and pushed him to see a new possibility for ministry to the Gentiles. The power of this woman's faith expanded the horizon of Jesus' vision and widened the scope of God's plan for human salvation.

Jesus changed his mind! Later, St Paul would further remove boundaries to inclusiveness and in very short time, the early church would primarily comprise Gentile Christians. God's love and healing power knows no ethnic, political, or social boundaries.

There is one critical thing to note. It's not the woman's cleverness or sassiness Jesus praises or gives as the reason he'll show her mercy. Jesus declares, "Great is your faith!", thus endorsing faithfulness as the price of invitation to his banquet table.

Following Jesus means we must constantly test what we've been taught, and what we've always believed. Jesus doesn't offer us a clear set of instructions about where to go and what to do. The Christian life isn't static, but dynamic. We should always be challenging the traditions which we hold so dearly. We must examine our most cherished beliefs. And when the Spirit leads, we must be willing to change, and follow our Lord into his harvest fields. Dear Saints, the possibilities are endless. Let's embrace the outsider, the stranger, even the enemy, and receive God's gracious blessing, "St Peter's, great is your faith!" Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.