

GOSPEL: Matthew 15:21-28

²¹ Jesus left that place (near the sea of Galilee) and went away (north) to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Jesus traveled out of the land of Israel into territories where Gentiles lived. Some have said no Israelite would walk alone in the region of Tyre and Sidon. I can imagine the disciples suddenly walked along with a keen awareness of their surroundings.

No Israelite would sit down and eat with a Gentile and expect to remain clean. It was more than being a rival like competing sports teams in nearby communities. I remember how we were encouraged to look with suspicion on the opposing team in order to get ourselves psyched for the game. This was more than that. This had to do with keeping the people of Israel pure and clean. Simple contact with a person from the unclean list would force a priest or servant of the temple to a time of quarantine.

Gentiles, like the woman in our story, were excluded from the temple. Yet in our story the woman rightly cries out to Jesus and begs for mercy. It is said that she was a Canaanite woman. It is actually surprising that any people of Canaan still existed.

You may remember that the people of Canaan were living in the land to which God brought the twelve tribes of Israel. The tribes of Israel, the people of God, were to occupy the land while pushing the Canaanites out. They were to keep themselves separate from these foreign people, but intermarriage and worship of lesser gods like Baal began to occur. Israelites began to define themselves against the Canaanites. Violence against Canaanites was regular. It was a troubling part of the history of God's people which was still felt in the days of Jesus.

When the woman cried out the disciples reacted automatically against her because of her Canaanite heritage. They reacted against her because she was considered unclean.

Yet she cried out to Jesus calling him “Lord” and “Son of David.” She knows who Jesus is. She cried out for mercy for herself and the sake of her daughter who was tormented by a demon. She knew Jesus was a healer. She boldly asks Jesus for what she knows he can supply. Mercy! But Jesus is silent.

The disciples fill the void with their objections to this one who was connected to the heritage of an ancient foe. After all, how can a woman, and a Canaanite one at that, address Jesus, even if it concerns a sick child? The disciples fill the void with their limited understanding of mercy. Remember, they have a heightened level of anxiety in this region with foreign people and it limits their capacity to express mercy.

For a moment Jesus stands with the disciples and their prejudices as he recites his mission to reach out to the lost ones of the house of Israel, and certainly not to Canaanites. Jesus had previously sent his disciples out to minister to the lost ones of Israel. For a moment the disciples straighten their shoulders, justified that they have read the situation correctly.

But the Canaanite woman will not be stopped from her goal to get Jesus to cure her daughter. She cries out a second time, kneeling, and pleading, “Lord, help me. Canaanite lives matter!”

People who kneel bend themselves before a king. In the narrative of the gospel of Matthew, there is the story of the Magi, known to be Gentiles, who sought out Jesus after his birth. They traveled far to bend the knee when they found the baby Jesus.

People who kneel bend themselves before one who exhibits power. Also in Matthew, a leper kneels before Jesus and asks to be made clean. A ruler kneels and asks for his daughter’s healing. At the end of the gospel of Matthew when the resurrected Lord, Jesus Christ, appears, the disciples kneel and worship him.

This woman recognizes Jesus as the one who has the authority to sit on the throne of David and wield power over the evil inflicting her daughter. Her daughter’s life matters! All that she wants is the mercy she knows Jesus can give. To her it is no longer connected to purity laws, it is a matter of life and death. Life and death bring her to request a level of healing which she knows Jesus has already displayed. When she heard of him, he had healed those from the Syrian region, beyond Galilee.

Jesus responds to this second cry for help still with a reluctance to act on her behalf. He recites again that mercy is for the Jews, not the foreigners, not Canaanites, not Gentiles. I wonder if the disciples were inwardly saying, “That’s right, Jesus. You tell her. Mercy is for those who know the faith! Mercy is for the children of God, not the dogs, not the unclean.”

This woman hears Jesus' limit and senses the disciples support for it, but she will not be deterred. "Even a little mercy, what others might not see as significant is more than enough for me and my daughter. Even a crumb is powerful enough to set my daughter free! Her life matters! Canaanite lives matter! You Lord, are the hope of my life and my daughter's life, and really for the life of all!"

At this Jesus could no longer deny the faith the woman expressed in him. "Great is your faith! You are no longer excluded! Mercy and healing and life are yours!" With this God through Jesus broke down a barrier, surprised his disciples, and entered new territory.

Let us be people who follow Jesus lead to love God and all peoples. Let us show that mercy and healing and life have no boundaries.