

# The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Peter Strommen

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



## The Sermon Text — Matthew 15: 21-28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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.' 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.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly.

### SERMON

At first hearing, it's Jesus' gruffness that stands out. Wow, he gave that poor woman such a hard time and seems even to insult her at one point! Why? This seems utterly out of character from the one who is first to reach out to others-- including outsiders. What's going on here?

On second hearing, you have to marvel at the Canaanite woman --a tiger mom with chutzpah. And on deeper reflection, isn't there something revolutionary about this passage -- an in-your-face challenge to religious boundaries? The ancient Jews asked: "Who deserves God's mercy?"; "Who gets to enter the Temple and have communion with God?" Answer: God's chosen, the Jews. Only, it has never been quite that neat. Sometimes God surprises. And you can see this in the lesson from Isaiah for today (Isaiah 56:1, 6-8) and throughout the New Testament and Christian history.

This morning I wish to deal with two things. What's going on in this conversation between Jesus and the Canaanite woman? And, how is God challenging us on "Who deserves God's mercy"?

#### Why Does Jesus Give the Woman Such a Hard Time?

There is really no way to make this conversation sweet. It reminds me of a wrestling match, a battle of wills. Back in Genesis, Jacob wrestles all night with an angel -- Scripture hints of it being God. Jacob wants a blessing and he won't let go. Exhausted, with morning coming, the angel wounds Jacob and then gives a blessing in the form of a new name: Israel. Israel means, one who wrestles (strives) with God. Jacob, means deceiver and his identity has now changed to Israel. Well, this Canaanite mama bear approaches Jesus as the true outsider she is and wrestles for a blessing for her daughter in the form of Jesus' healing touch. And she won't give up either.

Let me first say that Bible scholars do not agree on why Jesus responds as he does. We just don't have any way of knowing that for sure. Some compare this verbal wrestling match with our personal experiences with prayer, which may sometimes feel more like struggle than peace. God seems silent, even unwilling to grant what we know is right and good. But in the struggle, a wonderful answer finally does come -- along with deepened, stronger faith. Is that what Jesus is doing here? -- testing the woman's faith? Lately, other scholars believe Jesus actually changed his mind here. Personally, I wonder if Jesus was teaching his disciples by voicing the usual Jewish reasons why this woman wasn't included, knowing she would reveal a powerful faith and human need that would challenge their thinking. Here are some things to help you think about it.

Tyre and Sidon don't mean anything to us -- nor does the word Canaanite. But to a Jewish Christian acquainted with that area and Jewish history, the words are red flags. This is pagan territory. Ancient Canaanites lived there and fiercely fought Israel, in every respect. Canaanites worshipped many gods, including Moloch, the fire God, to whom living children were sacrificed. This was an abomination in Scripture so that when Israel itself degenerated into this practice, on the ravine of Hinnom outside of Jerusalem, the prophets condemned the people. After reform, this place of sacrifice was regarded as so profane, that a word for hell (gehenna) is derived from the name of this ravine. You might say that by identifying the woman as Canaanite Matthew is using a term that denotes a total outsider. So, when the woman says that her daughter is possessed by a demon, we could imagine a disciple muttering under his breath: "now there's a surprise!"

So, picture this scene: Jesus and his 12 disciples, all religious Jews, travel into this distinctly pagan territory. This is unusual for Jesus to do. Matthew writes that Jesus withdrew there after a conflict with the Pharisees. Along comes this woman, who pleads with Jesus to heal her daughter. The text makes it clear this is not a one-time request either, with Minnesota manners. It's repeated and loud, maybe more like Brooklyn? But that's not all. Nice Middle Eastern women didn't approach men without a male escort. It just wasn't done.

The disciples counsel Jesus to "send her away" -- their standard response to inconvenience. Jesus responds differently. First, he is silent. He simply doesn't respond. I've done that on the street before. I walk by a person who I sense is sizing me up to ask for money and I look the other way, pretending not to hear the word mister that might be addressed to me. Maybe that's what some of you have done too. We hope it will go away with this nonverbal signal: "I'm not going to be drawn in here". But notice: Jesus is not

addressed with a “Hey, mister”- type title. “Son of David”, she says, “Have mercy on me.” “Son of David” is a Jewish title for Messiah. She must have heard about Jesus and believed he is Messiah.

Now Jesus breaks his silence: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”. True enough. Jesus came to his own people first - - the only ones prepared to understand him and the ones God chose to carry the faith we now share. Jesus’ ministry was almost exclusively to and among Jews. That doesn’t stop her, however, for now having gotten Jesus to respond, the woman kneels before him: “Lord, help me!”

Jesus’ next words are most troubling, even though we must bear in mind that he is repeating the common Jewish way of referring to Gentiles at that time. “It is not fair to take the children’s food”, replies Jesus, “and throw it to the dogs”. Dogs, of course, get into all kinds of stuff that is “unclean for Jews” and this is really important to understanding what is going on here. Clean is not about germs - - that’s a relatively recent discovery that came with microscopes. Clean is about what you touch, what you do, what you don’t do or touch in order to be fit to enter the Temple in Jerusalem. That matters because God’s special Presence is believed to be there. Jews can be clean by certain codes of dress, diet and behavior. These are spelled out in Scripture and further elaborated by tradition. It’s behind what the later practice of kosher, although with a different meaning, since the Temple no longer exists.

In short, only Jews are worthy to enter the Temple, Jews who are ritually clean. In the time of Jesus, a sign was posted outside the inner courtyard of the Temple, warning Gentiles (non-Jews) that if they enter this sacred space, they will be killed.

Now Jesus’ word for dog can be translated to house puppy but that only softens things a bit. And what comes from the lips of the Canaanite woman is a reply so clever, so insistent on being included, and yet so respectful: “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs from the table”.

Now the Jesus we recognize replies: “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

#### What Does This Mean?

This incident must have made a powerful impression on the disciples and the early church because as challenging as it is, it appears right smack in the middle of Matthew and Mark. And I want you to notice how Matthew arranges this story relative to others.

Remember last Sunday, when Jesus says to Peter: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” There is not much that happens in Matthew between that story and this story - - just a teaching by Jesus, that, it turns out, really offends the Pharisees. You know what it is? Clean and unclean (teaches Jesus) is about what comes from the inside, from our hearts and lips to God and neighbor, not what we eat, or touch or seem to be on the outside.

So notice this: Peter, the future leader of the church is challenged for his weak faith, the most religious leaders of

Israel, the Pharisees, are called on the carpet for their hypocrisy, their tradition on clean and unclean is challenged and here, in pagan territory, a so-called dog hears these words: “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

I’m reminded of the phrase most familiar to people who took the Bethel Bible Series. I need only say one word and there will be some of you who can fill in the rest: “Blessed.....to be a blessing”. “Blessed to be a blessing” summarizes the great promise of God to Abraham, a promise so immense that it is taking centuries to unfold. Being blessed as God’s people tends to come easier for both Israelites and Christians than “being a blessing”. Israel needed to be reminded and so do Christians.

Jesus and the Canaanite woman is a story that is connected to this unfolding of God’s promise. The outsider pleads for a share of the Messiah’s blessing and she receives it - - a sign of the kingdom of God. But little does she know that the One who heals her daughter will one day take upon himself all the un-cleanness that stands between humanity and God and humanity with itself.

Paul writes a few years later: “God demonstrated God’s love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” And, at the time of Jesus’ death, Matthew records that the curtain separating the Temple’s Holy of Holies from worshipers - - even ritually clean worshipers - - is torn in two. God’s mercy breaks through the “dividing wall of hostility”.

The Canaanite woman’s story and many others to follow in the New Testament all point to a mercy and love of God that we never quite catch up to. But these stories keep coming, long after the New Testament was completed and continue down through the history of the church.

Perhaps the homeless man who died on the steps of Bethel Lutheran 2 and ½ years ago and caused this congregation to re-think its ministry, is just one more example of how the Spirit of Jesus challenges an unconscious boundary of behavior and awareness of who receives God’s mercy.

God’s mercy is surprising, dynamic and transforming. Often, it shows up where we least expect it. May God’s mercy continue to challenge us. Amen. © 2011