

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, NM
Rev. Christopher McLaren, Rector
Sunday August 20, 2023 Proper 15A
Text: Matthew 15:21-28 Canaanite Woman and a Battle of Wits

This Jesus story always reminds me of one of my favorite scenes in *The Princess Bride* when the Westly trying to rescue Buttercup engages the Sicilian Vizzini in a dizzying battle of wits concerning a goblet poised with locane powder. The Sicilian ends the battle of wits with this famous line "You fallen to one of the classic blunders the most famous is Never fight a land war in Asia but only slightly less well known is never go in against a Sicilian, when death is on the line." To me this Gospel story pits Jesus the healer and teacher with the desperate Canaanite woman in a battle of wits themselves.

Jesus is in Gentile territory and a Gentile woman seeks him out. The Gospel writer gives us an assertive woman, coming forward toward Jesus, ignoring any cultural taboos or constraints about Gentile women talking with Jewish men. The woman is not shy, in fact, we are told that she is shouting, crying out to Jesus the healer. The Gospel writer wants us to pay attention so he inserts "Behold" in the story itself.

The woman is a powerful character in this story. She appears to know Jesus better than many others, addressing Jesus as "Lord, Son of David." Her keen insight is that Jesus is connected to the divine as Lord but that he is also an everyday Jew, a son of David with a lineage from a particular people with a storied history.

Her request is clear and focused. "Have mercy on me... my daughter is tormented by a demon." This is a mother, full of love and concern for her beloved. She asks for mercy as we all do for our children. Who here wants mercy for their children? She seeks it from the one who is not only a Son of David, a flesh and blood Jewish man, but also Lord, related to the divine in such a way that God's power is at work within him, flowing through him. The insight of the woman is stunning, Mercy is what Jesus loves. Mercy flows from God through every human who is in right relationship with God. Jesus mediates mercy, he pours mercy into the world. God's Mercy shines forth from his eyes of compassion, reaches out to people in his strong hands, drips from his tongue when he speaks, pools about him where he stands.

"But Jesus did not answer her at all." Ughhh!

This is perhaps the most disturbing point in the story. The one full of mercy ignores the cries of a pleading mother. We are not told exactly why Jesus does this. But clearly his initial response is cool toward this Gentile woman, acknowledging neither her presence or request. Is Jesus acting out of his cultural training that Jews do not interact with Gentiles. Is his ignoring of the Canaanite woman a form of discrimination and racism?

The disciples, the eager sycophants that they are, suggest to Jesus that he send the woman away as she is bothering them, crying out and being emotional. It's an age-old problem, emotional women and embarrassed men. But Jesus is not bothered by the woman's insistence and pleading. His limitation is of a different sort, it is in Jesus' mind. We can try to say it nicely. *Jesus sees his mission and ministry as limited, to his own people, within the boundaries of Israel. The woman is a Canaanite from the region of Tyre and Sidon and therefore is outside his target audience. She is not a member of the House of Israel and so is not included in his mission. Additional information can be found in the appendix.*

The woman however is not put off by this inside / outside talk. She comes before Jesus and kneels. A humble act of respect and need. She is like the Magi from the east kneeling before the infant Jesus to pay him homage. Jesus' exclusive ministry, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel does not keep her away. And when she is finally in front of Jesus her request is simple and direct, "Lord, help me!" As one commentator noticed, there is no flattery, no bargaining, no argument. Just a simple plea and one that cleverly eliminates her earlier "Son of David" language. Jesus is pushing the woman away, taking refuge in his particularity as a Jew at the expense of a wider humanity. The woman moves away from Jesus' Jewish identity and focus on her human need and his connection to divine mercy. "Lord, help me!" A simple prayer. A desperate prayer. A prayer we all know too well. Lord, have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.

Again, Jesus rebuffs the woman, "It is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" Sometimes I'm surprised that this story is in the New Testament. I think that this shows Jesus as a person captive to his culture and time. Is he really still refusing to respond to this passionate Gentile woman just because she is from the wrong side of the tracks? Is Jesus really so prejudicial that he tries to avoid this encounter, hordes the gift of God within him from this loving mother? C'mon Jesus, change and grow! Don't be a bigot! Did I say that out loud? Did I just utter a heresy?

Fortunately, I seem to be more offended than the Canaanite woman. She plunges ahead retorting with a dumbfounding cleverness:

"Yes Lord but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table!"

There is a lot to the rapid word-play between Jesus and the woman and how Jews and Gentiles managed their canine friends. Jews didn't allow dogs in their homes evidently and Gentiles did. But the real point of the story is the humility and pluck of the woman. She basically says, ok yeah, I'm not a Jew so I'm not at the table, in your world I'm a dog, something less than human, but I'm not outside the house anymore, I'm under the table and I'm willing to eat even your scraps if you are the messenger of God. Jesus I'm in your house now, pay attention.

It's a fierce and humble speech. It's complicated theology and unrelenting passion for her daughter. I'll do anything to have my daughter healed. I'll play your games. I'll accept your racial slurs, I'll go toe-to-toe with the rabbi from Galilee, I'll stare down your rejection and raise you

one moment of compassion and mercy. I will make you act like a Savior you Son of David. I'll drag you outside of your house, outside of your limited mission to the lost children of Israel and into the larger world of God's beloved creatures. We all need God's mercy. God's mercy belongs to all of humanity not just to your kin and nation. We need a Savior who can change and grow. We need a mercy that is not narrowly confined. We need mercy to pour out of the heavens on all of God's people, even the dogs under the table. You yourself Jesus are to be a house of prayer for all nations, not just a chosen few. (Isaiah)

Jesus takes one big cosmic throaty gulp and realizes that he has been bested. The Canaanite woman from Tyre and Sidon has wrestled the Galilean Rabbi into submission with a clever double arm-bar and a surprise roundhouse kick to his Messianic Mind.

A smile comes over Jesus' face and he begins to laugh, he laughs out load, a great big belly shaking heaven rending laugh. He shakes his head, he shakes off his small-minded mission his senseless cultural prejudice, his hidebound ways and says:

"O Woman, great is your faith, let it be done for you according to your wish"

She is no longer a dog. She is a woman, a life giver and surprisingly she has given new life to Jesus. The pestering woman has become a bearer of greater truth, an agent of transformation. What is her great faith? Through her persistence and cleverness and humility and insistence on mercy she has reminded Jesus of who he really is! He is a Jewish healer, true that! But more than that he is the fullness of God in human form, walking around on earth. He is as the woman proclaimed the Power of God at work here and now, the one who brings mercy.

It is remarkable that in this story Jesus does what the woman asks him to do. Jesus is not always amenable to what others desire of him, the Pharisees, crowds, disciples, and others. But in this remarkable story Jesus does what the Canaanite woman asks. Could it be that Jesus hears the voice of God through this woman? Could it be that he is called into the fullness of who he is by one outside his circle? Revelation can come from unexpected quarters. The voice of God can come from the heavens, "You are my beloved son with whom I am well pleased," but it can also come through ordinary people who are seeking mercy in a broken world.

What is Great Faith?

The approach of the Canaanite woman changes throughout the story. She begins noisy and assertive, becomes pleading and compliant, and finally clever and confrontive. While her approach shifts, she is consistent. She has an ill daughter and if this Jewish healer can help, she is going to get him on her team. She will not let the disciples' misogyny or a little ethnic hatred get in her way. She knows her mission and remains laser focused.

Jesus characterizes the woman as having great faith. Often people talk about faith as a "belief in God." I suppose great faith then is faith in God even in the midst of great suffering or when it doesn't appear that God is there and we are tempted to feel abandoned by God.

But the faith of the Canaanite woman is different. Her great faith is that she is tenacious like a tiger. There is a situation that requires healing and she is single-minded in her pursuit of Jesus, the healer. If she has to beg, cajole or twist the Messiah's arm to get her daughter healed she will do it. If she has to remind him that there are many religions and many ethnic groups but only one God, she will do that too. Whatever it takes, that is what this woman will do to see her daughter made well.

One gospel commentator described a contemporary mother who he heard speak to her son about a particular demon that had taken up residence within his attitudes. She said, "I want you to know that I am never going to stop, you think that you can sulk and avoid me and I will go away, but I am never going away, I want you to know that. And you can never run far enough to get away from me. This stuff is going to change." If you heard the tone and timbre of her voice you would know that you had encountered an absolute, an unshakeable presence in a world of swaying reeds. (Shea)

Faith is not just a relentless commitment to the betterment of people and situations; it also calls on our creative abilities to make that betterment possible. Creativity does not have a set agenda or pre-ordered path. Creativity is adaptable and responsive to the situation. Creativity doesn't know what it is up against. It does, however, know that in the world of disease or evil there will always be resistance. So, creativity is alert, flexible, and gathered for whatever it might take. Will it require argument? Ok, then there will be arguments. Does it require patience and quiet waiting? Then there will be patience and quietness. Does it require confrontation and truth-telling? Then there will be confrontation and truth. Of course, there are moral limits to all of this but creativity is not a limited path.

Once we understand that great faith involves the creativity and persistence to bring about the good, the cloud of witnesses, the saints of God increase in number. There are the care-givers who are always advocating for their beloved or their patient or their family member. There is the research scientist glued to the microscope trying to find a cure for the disease. There is the dedicated teacher looking for a way into closed minds. There is the community organizer helping the timid to find their voices. There is the employer trying to work through the struggles of training and understanding. There is the loan officer working to help the applicant on the edge of qualification to get approved. There is the lawyer trying to do the best thing for the kids and the parents. There is the therapist patiently listening deeply to the troubles and anxieties for a clue to breakthrough.

Great faith, flows through all of us when we remind each other of the deeper truth of who we are and to whom we belong. We are created in the image of God, God-breathed and we are worthy of God's love and mercy ourselves. In remembering this, the power of healing begins to flow through each of us into the world, into the lives around us where it is so desperately needed. Are you a person of great faith? Each of us can be, has been and will be again. What we need most is to know what we desire, what good we want to bring into the world or into the lives of those around us. Then with determination, creativity and pursue it by whatever it

takes, until the mercy of God flows through you and into the world by God's grace. If the Canaanite woman can engage in a battle of wits with Jesus, so can each us. O heavens open and let the mercy of God flow down like and every flowing stream. Amen.