

Text: Matthew 15:21-28

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²¹ Jesus left that place and went away 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.

Pestering Jesus

First of all, I want to thank my amazing congregation Pleasant St. UMC for nominating me for this honor, particularly Grenda Banton, Kerri Oliver, Carol Crothers and their confederates who helped make this happen. I also want to acknowledge the members of my church, including the choir, who left Waterville at 4:30 this morning to get here, because evidently, they had nothing better to do on a Saturday in June. Actually, I think it had more to do with meeting Mark Miller, given that we have been singing his words all the way through Lent.

I'm also grateful for my family being here, my oldest Alex who works as a counselor with troubled teens in the Maine woods to help turn their lives around, my son Patrick who is departing for the University of Indiana in a couple of weeks to enter a Ph.D. program in theoretical physics, probing the mysteries of the universe, and my daughter Laura who studies math, computer science, and geology at Brown University about a mile from Rev. Ziegler's former church in Providence. And, of course, Lynn my wife of 31 years who enriches the lives of kids with autism and other challenges as a speech pathologist in Augusta. She also keeps our family on track, and how all five of us got here today on time, with matching socks, I have no idea, but she (I suspect) does.

I also want to thank the saints in my life who have inspired me as a Christian, as a preacher, and as a member of the New England Annual Conference, this body which has shown such courage in standing for change and for justice in troubled times. These folks are too many to name individually, but let me call attention to three people who are close to my heart today: Vicki Woods is heroically typical of the incredible District Superintendents that I have served under for the last 26 years. She has been a voice for justice from my first days in ministry, *and* she helped my congregation figure out how to nominate me for this award, so if you don't like what you hear, blame Vicki. I'm also thankful for the life of the late H. Everett Wiswell, who was my pastor in Caribou, ME in 1978, when as a High School Junior I screwed up my courage and shared with him (after a week at Mechuwana) that I felt called to ministry. Had he chuckled or rolled his eyes or told me to go grow up a little, I might have never said another word, but instead he honored that holy moment in my life with Christ-like compassion and love, for which I am grateful. Finally, I'm remembering my doctoral advisor, the late Dr. Fred Craddock who helped me figure out how to be a student of the Bible and a pastor at the same time. In the great circle of scholars at Emory University, Fred was the one who found me in my confusion about where I was headed, and helped me find my way through

the Ph.D. program and back to the church, all the while being an inspiration in *every* sense of the word.

[And I should add that of the three people I just mentioned, Vicki Woods is the TALL one! So, it's a good day for the short people!]

And it is essential to remember, as well, the Rev. Wilbur C. Ziegler, who so inspired his congregation in Providence with his “compassion, optimism, ability, courage, and sensitivity” that they created *this* award in *his* honor. I never met him personally, but I have been blessed by his legacy and inspired by his character and faith.

You have to know that I have been listening to the Wilbur C. Ziegler sermon every year at annual conference for nearly 25 years. And every year that I've heard it, I've shared one thought with every United Methodist Pastor who was listening with me. “Thank God that isn't me!” My second thought, of course, has been to realize how God has used my amazing colleagues and siblings in the faith to break open some fresh perspective on God's word, and God willing that will happen again today.

Will you pray with me? *Holy and Gracious Lord, who quiets the fear in every trembling heart, use these moments as you desire: to bless, to heal, to challenge, or to mend, and may your holy wisdom reveal herself to our hearts, either because of or in spite of your servant. Amen.*

A Canaanite woman stood in the road... A *Canaanite* woman stood in the road...*not* the Syrophoenician woman we read about in Mark's gospel, no, a *Canaanite* woman, torn from the very pages of the ancient Torah, 1,000 years or more out of time. If some of you Whovians are wondering if she just stepped out of a blue police call box, you'd be justified. Matthew has conjured up a time traveler, an ancient enemy, a mother from one of seven tribes driven out to make room in the Promised Land for the children of Israel. You remember the Canaanites from Deuteronomy 7:1 don't you, that passage you assign to your lay leader when she's being difficult? How Moses predicted military defeat over *the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites*, "*seven nations larger and stronger than you*," he said. "And how should we treat these scoundrels, Moses, when we come into the land?" the people inquired.

And Moses, speaking for God, responded with words that still trouble us: "*You must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, ... show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. ...Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, burn their idols in the fire.*" ...Show / them / no /

mercy. It's as though Moses said, "They are incompatible with the love of God."

So, when a Canaanite woman appears in the road standing before Jesus...wow. Now we get to see what happens when the incarnate Son of God crosses paths with the sworn enemy of the Ancient Hebrews. And when Jesus' friends saw her, did those devastating words from the Great Lawgiver echo in their minds, "Show them no mercy."

Well, then the Canaanite woman makes a ruckus. Not content simply to be in Jesus' presence, she not only *speaks* her truth, she *shouts* her truth, and the *first* words out of her mouth? "Have mercy." "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." "Have mercy on me, Lord." So here she is, the very embodiment of the outsider, the rejected one, whose exclusion from mercy came from the very lips of Moses himself, speaking for God, and she asks for the very thing that the Bible says she can't have: Mercy. Not because she's unworthy, not because she's a bad mother, not because she has an evil reputation, but simply because...she was born that way: born on the wrong side of the racial, ethnic, tribal line that had stood for centuries. By cursing her people, Moses had cursed all of their descendants, including her demon-possessed daughter. Mercy indeed.

“Go study your Bible, woman,” the disciples might have said with justification. “There *is* no mercy for you.”

Well I wish I could say that Jesus moved quickly to lift this ancient curse, but it’s to Matthew’s credit that he doesn’t give us the inspired story we *want*, but the inspired story we *need*. Jesus, for whatever reason, does what the body of Christ *still* does when confronted with the one who doesn’t quite fit our definition of acceptable. Jesus, says...nothing. Dead silence. “But he did not answer her at all,” Matthew says. Given the harsh words of Deuteronomy, maybe Jesus considered that silence *was* a merciful response, but this woman began to disturb the bureaucracy with her shouting, her protest, her misbehavior, and soon the disciples are whispering in Jesus’ ear that he must dismiss her because... she is driving them crazy.

So Jesus, seeing that silence isn’t working so well, speaks, not words of liberation, but (I’m sorry to say) words of “policy.”

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (whew!)

Understand that Jesus doesn’t say these words to the Canaanite woman, the *victim* of his silence. He speaks this policy to his brothers, his inner circle, his council of advisors, his general conference if you will. And within that tightly knit circle of like-minded individuals, this resolves the situation: A Canaanite woman has asked for help, ignoring her was

ineffective, but now we have issued a policy statement that covers her situation. Her daughter doesn't meet our eligibility requirements for assistance. "Sorry, Canaanite woman, you'll have to get help someplace else." And we have to assume that one of the disciples carried this news to her, or even worse that she had to endure listening to her eligibility for mercy being debated by a group of people that had given her no greeting, offered her no right to speak, and did not even bother to learn her name. Because, you see in that moment she *wasn't* a person, a mother, a fellow human being in the eyes of the infant church. She was an "issue," a problem, an agenda item, a complication to be dealt with.

What happens next is perhaps best summarized by the words of the unlikely prophet Sen. (Mitch) McConnell. "*She had appeared to violate the rule. She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted.*" [US Senate, 2.7.17]

Yes, those Canaanite women are everywhere.

But she came and knelt before Jesus, saying, "Lord, help me."

I have to imagine that that was not an easy thing to do. And I mean literally that I *have* to imagine it because I have never been in her situation. Because white, middle-class, over-educated, straight men in our culture...

don't *have* the experience that this woman just had, we aren't spoken of in the third person by those in power, we are not categorized in ways that subsume our sacred personhood under a label. We have the privilege of being spoken *to*, not spoken *about*. So, before those of us who carry such privilege in our backpack, assume that we would not intrude upon Jesus's personal space with such audacity and boldness, *or* that we would not humble ourselves before a group that had just so disrespected us, let's you and I walk a mile or two in *her* shoes, her *Canaanite* shoes.

The conversation that Jesus and woman proceed to have is unworthy of our Jesus, and Matthew knows that. But Matthew, inspired by the Holy Spirit, needs us to hear it because the church still, to this day, confuses *justice* and *charity*. Jesus said to this woman, weary from night after night of rubbing her daughter's back, bathing her forehead, listening to her cries, holding her trembling body, to her Jesus said, "*It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*" And summoning every ounce of self-control that she can, the woman answers, "*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.*"

When I hear her say those words, it breaks my heart. Because it says that she has been so beaten down, and so consumed by worry for her child, that she will sacrifice her own dignity for the sake of another. In this

moment *she* is Messianic, *she* is self-sacrificing, *she* is embodying the love of God.

I *see* this woman's face, every day, in fact: in the women who walk into the Food Bank in my Church, and I hear her voice in the words that are spoken as they register and check in. I am grateful that these women are treated with respect and dignity by our volunteers, but I know they've heard the comments hurled at them by our society: "freeloaders, welfare queens, lazy, good for nothing." When we give to the poor out of our abundance, are we distributing crumbs to the dogs under the Master's table (along with a helping of shame and humiliation)? Or are we, conscious of our unclean hands, partnering with God to try to undo the economic injustice of our society, that has made a handful of people fabulously wealthy, while leaving scraps for public education, health care, nutrition, housing, college tuition, and job training?

Does it still have to be said in 21st century America that it is not a sin to be poor, that it is not a sin to be sick, illiterate, marginalized, mentally ill, addicted, bankrupt, persecuted, a refugee from tyrants, a teenager who is bullied? Being weak or in-need shouldn't put someone under the table with the dogs. In God's kingdom it is the *hungry* person who is seated first, and are not the ones in need of forgiveness, those who would deny them a chair?

Well, just when I am ready to give up on Jesus in this story, he responds with words that give me back my hope and restore my faith. Because with this woman kneeling before him, Jesus doesn't say, "your obedience is impressive, your submission is acceptable, your shame makes me pity you sufficiently." Instead Jesus looks at her, looks at his disciples, and looks at the crowd, and whether he has just come to this conclusion or not—the Bible doesn't tell us—Jesus gets it. There may be a passage in scripture that condemns this woman, there may be a standing policy that denies her mercy and justice and inclusion, but Jesus looks at her self-sacrificial posture, her willingness to be humiliated for her daughter, her God-like compassion and tells her to stand up, and with one phrase Jesus restores her dignity: "woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And it was.

Did you hear that first part? He *praises...her faith*. And in that moment, we know that Jesus *sees* her, *includes* her, is in *fellowship* with her, and (dare we say it) has *learned* from her. The word *faith* is used 17 times in Matthew's gospel, and always it is the mark of genuine discipleship, either because one has it or because one lacks it. Those who need to hear the Sermon on the Mount are called "those of little faith," the Centurion in

chapter 8 (another outsider) has his servant healed because of the Centurion's faith, the disciples in the boat during the storm are afraid because they lack faith, the paralyzed man is healed because of the faith of his friends, faith the size of a mustard seed will be capable of accomplishing anything, *and* what do the Pharisees, scribes, and hypocrites lack? Justice, mercy, and faith.

By praising the greatness of this Canaanite woman's *faith*, by raising her up from the dust, by speaking *to* her rather than *about* her, by recognizing the image of God already in her soul, Jesus has set *aside* scripture, *ignored* policy, and has shown the church *how* to be the Church of Jesus Christ when there's a Canaanite, an outsider, an incompatible, a suffering brother or sister standing right there in front of us, asking for mercy. It's not about *charity*, it's about *justice*!

Those of you who are close to me know that the last six years of my life have been consumed with accompanying my mother through the hell of dementia. By all possible measurements we are only part way down this path that will direct the rest of her life. It became apparent after my father's death that, even in the midst of pancreatic cancer, he had been compensating for her growing confusion. She lived with us for two years after that, then

moved to assisted living, and now resides in a memory unit that keeps her *physically* safe but *mentally* tormented by her continuing self-awareness of her failing memory. In time that will pass we are told, but when ignorance has become bliss, she will no longer remember us, and so we journey together and try to treasure every moment, even if it is painful for her and for us.

Because of Mom's illness, one of the words that I've had to learn this year is "paramnesia." Paramnesia occurs when a mentally compromised person tries to make sense of the world while suffering a partial lack of memory. And in order to speak coherently about an event, the patient will confabulate, include details in a story that didn't actually happen, will fabricate a reality that makes sense for the moment but is in fact, false.

Part of me wants to ask in my confusion, whether *Jesus* was suffering from theological paramnesia when this episode with the Canaanite woman occurred (and yes, I know there are multiple explanations of why he might have acted the way he did), but I've come to believe that Matthew *wasn't* in fact telling a story about Jesus; I think *Matthew* was telling a story about the church. Because as Matthew's congregation watched Imperial Rome crush Jerusalem like a walnut, and as they saw the smoke of destruction and persecution rise over the Holy City, Matthew's community knew that things

were going to have to change, that the Church in order to survive and to be the authentic expression of God's love in the world, that the church was going to have to remember a few things it had forgotten. It was going to have to remember that Jesus sought out *strangers*, that Jesus praised the faith of *Gentiles*, that foreigners showed up at his birth, that ethnic, racial, tribal differences mattered nothing to him, that economic injustice and racial privilege is incompatible with Christian teaching, and most of all the church had to remember this: Canaanite lives matter...incompatibles lives matter, persecuted minorities matter, LGBTQ lives matter, victims of violence matter, and (today of all days) black lives matter.

You and I are here at the 2017 New England Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. And on my dark and cynical days, I find myself wondering how many more of these there will be. But even as we wither away, *Canaanites*—some of them our own children—are standing at the door of the church, longing to come in. They are standing there, cautiously, because (despite our faults) they sense *God* in us, someplace beneath all that silence, mis-interpreted scripture, and prejudicial legislation. They can hear the authentic Jesus in our heritage and in our passion for mission, despite the racism and white privilege that gets in the way of our

discipleship, *and* they can hear the rush of the wind of the Spirit that we keep trying to squeeze into containers of fear so that it won't change us.

It's time to let that Spirit loose! It's time to let that Spirit loose! It's time to let that Spirit loose! It's time to emulate the Jesus who tells persecuted strangers to stand up with dignity. It's time to rediscover the image of God in the people who scare us because they seem different. It's time to confess our sins, and seek to *undo* the harm we have done because of our *lack* of justice, mercy, and faith. The Holy Cities of 20th century Christendom are burning, there is no going back. The church I was trained to serve in seminary no longer exists, if it ever did. But Jesus? Yeah, Jesus has never left. As he promised, he is with us to the end of the age! And if we are willing to let *Jesus* heal our memory, to let *Jesus* strip away the false narratives of the church that we've told ourselves, who's in and who's out, to let *Jesus* put us square in the middle of town where Canaanite mothers can *pester* us and *teach* us with their requests for justice, *then* brothers and sisters, I have hope for this church. And if *this* church can find *that* Jesus and let him break our sinful selves open yet one more time, and put us back together with a lot *less* judgement and a lot *more* justice, mercy, and faith, then maybe some of those Canaanites will do *us* the honor of *crossing* the threshold, *standing* by our side, and *reminding* us that God wants them here

because of the *greatness* of their faith: And as *they* walk in the door (hear this now!), it's time for folks like me, who are invested in and benefit from the *status quo*, it's time for folks like me to *stop* talking...and listen...and change. It's our only hope.

Our choir sings a song, *Great, Great Morning*. And folks love it; it's a medley, a mash up of several gospel songs that are all looking towards "that day," that ultimate day when Jesus calls us home, or comes to check on what we've been up to [maybe you've seen the bumper sticker: "Jesus is Coming; Look busy!"]. I love singing that song; it just makes me feel good. But I also know that the *day* we're singing about is Judgment Day, that day when Jesus comes to *rebalance* the scales of justice. If you've read the prophets or the Book of Revelation, you've got to know that it doesn't turn out well for those who neglect the poor, oppress the Saints, or ignore the world's suffering.

One of the things that is said about Rev. Ziegler is that he was really good at "afflicting the comfortable." In that spirit we're going to *sing* that song, and I *want* you to enjoy it, but not *too* much, because we still have work to do, don't we? Amen?