

"His Mercy is More: The Canaanite Woman"

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Joshua 3:6-13

⁶ In the morning Joshua said to the priests, "Lift up the Ark of the Covenant and lead the people across the river." And so they started out and went ahead of the people.

⁷ The LORD told Joshua, "Today I will begin to make you a great leader in the eyes of all the Israelites. They will know that I am with you, just as I was with Moses. ⁸ Give this command to the priests who carry the Ark of the Covenant: 'When you reach the banks of the Jordan River, take a few steps into the river and stop there.'"

⁹ So Joshua told the Israelites, "Come and listen to what the LORD your God says. ¹⁰ Today you will know that the living God is among you. He will surely drive out the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites ahead of you. ¹¹ Look, the Ark of the Covenant, which belongs to the Lord of the whole earth, will lead you across the Jordan River! ¹² Now choose twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. ¹³ The priests will carry the Ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth. As soon as their feet touch the water, the flow of water will be cut off upstream, and the river will stand up like a wall."

Acts 18:1-8

Then Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.^[a] ² There he became acquainted with a Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently arrived from Italy with his wife, Priscilla. They had left Italy when Claudius Caesar deported all Jews from Rome. ³ Paul lived and worked with them, for they were tentmakers^[b] just as he was.

⁴ Each Sabbath found Paul at the synagogue, trying to convince the Jews and Greeks alike. ⁵ And after Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul spent all his time preaching the word. He testified to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. ⁶ But when they opposed and insulted him, Paul shook the dust from his clothes and said, "Your blood is upon your own heads—I am innocent. From now on I will go preach to the Gentiles."

⁷ Then he left and went to the home of Titius Justus, a Gentile who worshiped God and lived next door to the synagogue. ⁸ Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, and everyone in his household believed in the Lord. Many others in Corinth also heard Paul, became believers, and were baptized.

Matthew 15:21-28

²¹ Then Jesus left Galilee and went north to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Gentile woman who lived there came to him, pleading, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! For my daughter is possessed by a demon that torments her severely."

²³ But Jesus gave her no reply, not even a word. Then his disciples urged him to send her away. "Tell her to go away," they said. "She is bothering us with all her begging."

²⁴ Then Jesus said to the woman, "I was sent only to help God's lost sheep—the people of Israel."

²⁵ But she came and worshiped him, pleading again, "Lord, help me!"

²⁶ Jesus responded, "It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs."

²⁷ She replied, "That's true, Lord, but even dogs are allowed to eat the scraps that fall beneath their masters' table."

²⁸ "Dear woman," Jesus said to her, "your faith is great. Your request is granted." And her daughter was instantly healed.

When I first began in ministry, I knew very little. But there was one thing I did know, and that was I did not want to be a youth pastor. For a variety of reasons, I just didn't feel led or equipped to be a youth pastor. For my undergrad degree I interned at my home church, and after the internship they hired me as a part time worship pastor while I finished my degree. They asked me several times if I also wanted to take on the youth pastor role, and I repeatedly said "no". The few times I'd led my church's youth group during my internship I felt it hadn't gone that well, and it just reiterated my bias against doing this kind of ministry.

At my second church, the senior pastor and youth pastor quit their jobs on the same day. It was a tough time, and I was the last pastoral staff member standing. I felt led to make sure that the church didn't fall apart over this difficult situation, so I began to preach, lead worship, make sure the children's ministry was running, and also work in the youth ministry. I was young and had only been there two years, but God started to grow things in ways I hadn't even imagined. That's when you know that it's not you doing it. And by the time they'd hired a new senior pastor, I was leading both the youth

and worship ministries. I had a knack for relating to youth and explaining the gospel to them in ways that worked. It was clearly a God thing, because I always knew I couldn't do it on my own. God, as He does, does things differently than we do. He's twenty, thirty, forty steps ahead at all times, at least. And that leads us to our gospel story for today.

The last time I preached, I talked about the different groups we had in high school, and that people are naturally tribal in a lot of ways. The interesting thing about that is how we find ways to look down upon people who are different than us, and judge them in a way that makes them lesser in our minds. That was certainly at play in high school, and it's certainly at play in our world today. If we can dehumanize a group, then in our minds we don't have to afford them the same rights, privileges, and even basic human kindness. History shows that we humans don't have a great track record when it comes to such things. But God's plan was always to reconcile his creation, all of it, to Himself. This flies in the face of humanity's endless wars and arguments. He wants peace through everyone knowing Him.

And yet at the same time we have the tension that is created when God sets apart his people from other people groups. In this passage in Joshua, it's clear that God wanted His people in the land that He had chosen for them. It's clear that they would have to drive out the people already there so that this could happen. And ultimately what we find is that the goal is God's glorification. And what I mean by that is, God's glory comes first. When the works of His hands are displayed, when His promises are kept as they are in the book of Joshua by giving the Jewish people their promised land, He shows that He is the one true God. I say all this to explain that God's glory even comes before those who were removed from the land. When God moves amongst his people, and this is still true today, things may happen that give us pause. And it's in those moments that we learn that we are not God, and that He is not a fair God, at least as we understand fairness in our limited, human perspective. Ultimately, His movement and judgments are right and just, and I don't think we'll understand all of that on this side of heaven. But we do know that this really sets the stage for the change that Jesus is about to make in regard to a rabbi healing a gentile. It's this history of Canaan that shows just how far Jesus would go to do something different than what was "according to the rules", and it also teaches us just how far he'll go to accomplish his will, and who he will use to accomplish that will. His ways, scripture says, are not our ways.

The passage refers to a gentile woman. The original Greek says Canaanite, and it bears explaining why that's significant. The Book of Joshua includes Canaanites in a list of nations to be driven out of Israel as the Israelites conquered the land, and scripture

elsewhere portrays them as a group which the Israelites had annihilated, in other places enslaved. In short, they were the enemy.

Notice in this passage that Jesus goes to Tyre and Sidon, a gentile region. It begs the question, why would he do this when his ministry was to the Jewish people? From the context, it appears that it was more of a retreat. Jesus' ministry to the Jewish people had become increasingly fraught with controversy and disagreement. He had been rejected in his hometown of Nazareth. Perhaps he was tired and wanted a break. Mark's account of this story says that "he entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret." We have to remember that, although Jesus was fully God, he was also fully man. And he needed a rest, just like all of us do from time to time. But he also had a plan, a plan to teach the disciples something important.

When Jesus heals the Canaanite woman's daughter and removes the demon, he's not only doing a miracle, but he's marking a significant change in how God's people are to live. God's miraculous work is not only for the Jewish nation, but everyone who believes. This is no small thing. And the disciples needed to know this. Although Jesus said that his ministry was to the Jewish people, and that salvation will come through the Jews, it wouldn't end there. It precedes Paul saying that he will now go to the gentiles out of his frustration and rejection in Acts 18. This is a whole sea change in how God interacts with His creation. Which begs the question, why the change?

Well, we know from the Old Testament that there was always a mechanism for bringing non-Jewish people into the fellowship of God. Exodus 12:48 says this: "And when a stranger dwells with you and wants to keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native of the land."

And gentiles had been seen sometimes, or even referred to as, "dogs". They were unclean. But why were they unclean? They were not Jewish in the sense of nationality. But Jesus makes it clear that faith, not national origin or race, is the key. And if faith is the key, then the kingdom of God is open to anyone. It's not an exclusive club, nor is it a group borne out of superiority. In fact, it's far from that. It comes from a belief that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God.

And this is what I love about this story because it illustrates well that God is no respecter of persons, in other words, he doesn't place one person above another. Peter said is best in Acts 10: "I now truly understand that God does not show favoritism, 35but welcomes those from every nation who fear Him and do what is right."

So then why does Jesus seem to test the woman? There are several theories on this, but note how the disciples initially react. They wanted to send her away. She was a gentile. Her need was not on the agenda. But look at how Jesus responds in a way that teaches them how to handle people who ask for things from God. There is a back and forth to it. How serious are you, really? When you ask for things in the name of Jesus, how committed are you to them? Are they God-honoring? Are they self-serving? In this case, the healing is a good thing, but he wants the disciples to know that gentiles are worth healing as well. And so he says what they are thinking, namely that the ministry of Jesus was only for the people of Israel. And this was true from a prophetic standpoint: the Jewish nation had long awaited a messiah to gather all the Jewish people together, and had envisioned a conqueror. But the exchange is a lesson in relying on faith in God to get you through. And for the disciples, saying that your faith has been given a response was a great lesson. This healing wasn't based on who this woman was. Quite the opposite. It was based on faith. It's hard for us to put into a modern context just what this would mean because we've been taught as Christians that the gospel is for everyone who believes.

So many times, we talk about the evidence of miracles as a catalyst for belief. And that is true. But what if you believe before you get the thing that you want? What if your faith exists first? People who are critical of Christianity often ask why the ministry of Jesus didn't continue beyond three years, or why we don't see more evidence of miracles today. I'm not sure I have full answers to those questions, but I do know that God wants faith, and ideally He wants it first. Faith, even in the absence of a physical Jesus or miracles, is key. This woman knew enough about Jesus to ask for healing, but had never experienced it first-hand. Her faith in God's power made this thing happen without a previous experience of His faithfulness, as far as we know. It's much like the parable of the persistent widow, where the widow keeps bothering a judge for a judgment in her case. And he basically says, because you've bugged me so much, I'm judging in your favor. And the point is that faith, and believing that our God can do so much more than we ask, matters. It matters to God, of course, but it also matters for our own well being and spirit.

You see, when you are relying on faith to get you through, you truly are relying on God to do the things He's promised in his word. You're living without a worldly safety net, in a way. When God makes promises, He keeps them, but we sometimes live like we don't really believe them. Often we're in crisis mode when faith kicks in, but we are less likely to rely on God for positive choices and situations. And that's exactly what God desires, for you and I to believe what He said, no matter what.

Maybe we struggle with this because we feel like we've been let down by faith. It's okay to admit it. Things don't always pan out the way we thought they would, the way we believed they would, the way that we thought God was going to make them work. So is our faith contingent on the answer that we get? It can't be, not if we are really going to believe. Our worldly safety, our comfort...all these things are thrown out the window when you rely on faith, because it makes you obedient, and that can take you places where you may not want to go. Faith is dangerous from a worldly standpoint because when you're faithful, God will often call you to do the difficult work of the kingdom. But God does things differently. He will ask you to do difficult things. He will call you to work that you are not prepared to do, or that you may suffer for. He will call you to youth ministry three times after you've already settled that it's not for you.

Look at Martin Luther. When he discovered what God's word really said, he couldn't go back. He had faith that God would work in this discovery, but his life was anything but easy. Or the disciples, who all except one died a martyr's death. This is what faith can lead you to. Faith, and obedience to that faith, will make you do things that you hadn't planned on doing, that you maybe even resisted. This flexibility is essential to the Christian life.

The apostle Paul, in our epistle reading today, does something almost unthinkable. He decides to preach this new gospel, this good news, to a new group of people who may or may not be receptive. But he understands that they may be receptive in a way that the Jewish group may not because of their lack of history, which may actually be a good thing. It shows that sometimes our past, our upbringing, even in church, can take away our reliance on God if we're not careful. There was such a reliance on the institutions of man that had been set up by well-meaning people who were trying to please God, that many had no need for relying on this new way, and indeed were hostile to it. They didn't even want to hear it.

In all three of our readings today, faith ends up being the great unifying theme. It takes faith to take a group of people to a land you've never been to, never seen, and rely on God to conquer it for you. It takes faith to say that you are going to a different group than you were familiar with to preach, and it takes faith to go against cultural norms and ask for something you have been taught to not expect. Jesus gives great mercy to faith. We don't always phrase it in that way, but our faith is received so graciously, so abundantly by our God that we can sometimes forget just how blessed our faith can be. Imagine Jesus saying to us like he did to the Canaanite woman, "your faith is great. Your request is granted." What wonderful words to hear for people who are undeserving, and yet are continually blessed by the one true living God. In Jesus' name, amen.