

A Godly Life

A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 12A

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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.

Desperation.

Desperate for justice. Desperate for healing. Desperate for freedom. Desperate for the means to keep body and soul together.

Desperation fuels our protest. Protest demands an answer. Protest demands the truth.

So here we have the story of a woman who is desperate. A woman seeking help for her sick child. In her desperation she looks to Jesus. She has heard about Jesus and she intends to get his help for her sick daughter.

All of us, at some time or other know or will know what it is to be desperate in small ways and large. Times of desperation are built in – those moments of utter powerlessness, that deeply painful complete inability to resolve whatever it is that is tearing us apart.

And when it happens we turn to God we stretch out our hands in protest. We cry out for help

It's not hard, then, to identify with the suffering of this mother. Helpless to heal her child she turns to the local healer as her last resort; Jesus, our healer. Jesus will help.

But, wait a minute. This can't be right. We hear that Jesus refuses to help. You heard correctly. Refuses. He completely ignores her appeal to his mercy. He ignores her. As do Jesus own disciples. In fact, they demand Jesus send the woman away. And Jesus agrees

with them. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." He protests.

So here we have it. Jesus, our Jesus, is refusing to help this woman and her daughter because they are foreign. They are not citizens of the house of Israel. They are Canaanite, invisible, unimportant. Outsiders. A minority. The woman is not to be the subject of his compassion and mercy. Jesus turns her off.

The woman refuses to be sent away. Protesting, she kneels before him, "Lord, help me." she says. Still Jesus refuses her. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." In other words: it is not fair to take what is intended for my people and give it to those who are inferior. Harsh, harsh words. But the woman is desperate and in that desperation speaks the word of truth. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Jesus is shamed. Finally, his eyes are opened. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." The daughter is healed.

This is an uncomfortable story. If Jesus treats a woman like this, what about us? What about us when we are desperate? Why on earth did Matthew think to put this story in his gospel? It is the only

place in scripture which puts Jesus in a bad light, the only place where Jesus is bested in an argument.

So why is it here? Why has Matthew included this in his gospel?

At the start of our time together today we prayed, “Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life.” Jesus is being described as an example of a godly life and we are invited to follow in his footsteps.

But Jesus doesn't seem very godly in this story. Where is his famous compassion? Where is his mercy?

Jesus, we must never forget, was here to live a human life with the same problems and joys shared by all human beings. He was not excused temptation, hunger, or hurt. He was to live it all. He followed his God. He kept his eyes on the prize and the only time he wavered was the night before his crucifixion when he trembled in fear at what was to come. He had come to save his people. He had come to establish the kingdom of God's mercy and justice. And he would do everything required of him to make that happen.

Then this foreign woman turns up to muddy the water. Who was she anyway? Just a foreigner who worshipped a different God. A pagan woman. Why should he be responsible to her? He had enough to worry about with his own people. There was no time or room for her in his vision for Israel. He had better, more urgent things to do.

He tells her so, in plain words. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." You are not my problem.

And then that fateful truth, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

And Jesus truly sees her for the first time. He hears her protest. His heart is opened, and he knows compassion. It is the right thing to do. God is not to be limited by citizenship, race, ethnicity, religion, orientation, or status. The Canaanite woman knew that. Now Jesus understood it too. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." The daughter is healed.

It turns out that Jesus is setting before us the example of a godly life. A godly life is not about being perfect, about being right all the time. A godly life is a life lived in the light of the love of God. A godly life will stumble and fall. We are human after all. But the

important thing is not our stumbling but our willingness to get up and try again. To be prepared to see with fresh eyes at any moment. For a godly life can only be lived through the eyes of the heart. Matthew included this story to make this clear.

Many years ago I was travelling with a group of very conservative business men. We were on our way to meet with Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian President, on the Gaza strip. Our leader had to remind everyone to be polite, no matter their personal opinion of this controversial leader, considered a terrorist by many.

We were ushered into a room at his headquarters where he appeared a few minutes later. The atmosphere was tense. He told us of the poverty and sufferings of his people. He talked of their hunger and helplessness. The hearts of the businessmen began to soften. Instead of judgement, they began to ask what they could do, expecting demands of their considerable wealth. To their surprise Arafat made a simple request. He asked them to advocate for the passing of America's budget for that year. It had been delayed by political bickering. In it, President Arafat explained, alongside the billions for Israel, was a small amount for the Palestinians. About 1/30th of what America was providing for Israel. They needed it so badly, he said. Would they help? Would they appeal to the

American politicians for action? Yes, they said, yes, they most certainly would. And, as we left, each man present embraced the one they had considered their enemy. Yes, indeed they would help. They would go home. They would speak out for justice.

Jesus expects us to do the same, to gaze upon the world with our hearts, to recognize we can always be wrong. We are to own we can be too narrow, too opinionated too fixed in our views, too eager to believe we are right. To follow the Jesus way is to accept his challenge to pursue the truth, to be open to new insights and possibilities. To love God, love our neighbor, and to love our own holy self, no matter what it takes.

In doing so we are transformed by the riches of God's grace. We signed up for this at our baptism when we were asked,

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons loving your neighbor as yourself? And we answered, I will with God's help.

The work is underway. There is no expiry date and we have promised not to quit.

Amen

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