

Jesus and the Woman from Canaan

A Sermon on Matthew 15:21-28 by Rich Holmes

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Recently over at the Church of the Covenant down the street, they called a new pastor.

They called someone named Barbara Johnson whom I am especially fond of both because she has roots in South Carolina where I grew up and we both graduated from the same Seminary. I like Barbara and I have no doubt that she will be great for that church.

I also wanted to tell you that part of my work in this Presbytery involved working with the committee that called Barbara, and one of the things I suggested to that committee is that they ask every candidate their favorite bible story.

I bring that up today, because I don't think I have ever heard anyone, one person say that this story, the story of the Canaanite woman and Jesus is their favorite bible story. The story of the Good Samaritan maybe, the Prodigal Son perhaps, the Christmas story, maybe, but not this story. And why not? Well, it is clear why not. The picture we have of Jesus in this story doesn't really inspire us or even seem especially kind.

In this story, you see, we have a woman who comes before Jesus who has a demon possessed daughter. Apparently she has heard of Jesus and knows that he has the divine power to cast out such demons and so she follows him around shouting "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." Jesus at first, does not answer her, and the disciples beg him to send her away. But she keeps on shouting and so finally he answers her and says "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." She continues her begging saying "Lord, help me." But then he is even more firm, saying "It is not fair to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." Now, before we get to the end of the story, what is Jesus talking about? What is all this talk about

children and dogs and the lost sheep of Israel?” Well, this woman, this woman whom Jesus says these things to is a Canaanite woman and as such she is not a Jew. Jesus is a Jew and he is basically telling this woman that because she is not a Jew, her daughter is not entitled to his help. Why not? Is that kind? Is this the same Jesus whom all of us have learned to love from the time we were little? From the time we learned songs like *Jesus Loves Me*?

In the Flannery O’ Connor novel *Wiseblood*, there is a crooked preacher named Asa Hawks who goes around pretending to be blind so he can elicit sympathy in begging for money from the public. Now, I know there can be few things worse than pretending to be blind or handicapped or sick in order to cheat people out of their money. But why? Now, let me be clear, by asking “Why?” I don’t mean to suggest that what Asa Hawks did would somehow be okay, but sometimes I think it is helpful to ask ourselves what it is that makes certain things wrong, even when all of us know they are wrong. Well, you might say it’s wrong because it’s lying, it’s deceiving people and that is certainly true. And if someone lied to me and told me they were blind or sick or handicapped when they weren’t, I would have a right to be angry with that person. I would be wronged by that person. But as I think we all know, as I think every one of us knows, I wouldn’t be wronged in the same way or to the same degree that someone who is blind would be wronged.

And why is that? Well, I can’t fully answer that question, because I frankly don’t know what it is like to be blind. Now I can imagine as I’m sure you can what it’s like to try and get around in the world when you are blind crossing streets and trying not to bump into other pedestrians on sidewalks and never being able to know the independence of things most of us take for granted like driving a car. I can imagine what it’s like and I’m sure you can to. And I can imagine what it’s

like to be denied jobs because you are blind and wondering if when you do get jobs and certain opportunities it is just because you are pitied, just because others feel sorry for you. I can imagine what all these things are like and I'm sure you can too, but unless you are blind you can't know what it's like to have these experiences every day. We can imagine what it's like to be blind for a few minutes during a sermon and then return to our normal lives and never have to think about it again. But when you are blind you don't have that choice. And the reason you wrong someone who is blind by pretending to be blind is because unless you are blind, you don't deserve to go around telling other people that their experience is your experience. To claim that as your experience is to rob blind people of something that belongs to them, something that is sacred to them.

To claim a blind person, or a handicapped person, or a war veteran's experience is your experience, or to claim anyone else's special experience in life as your own experience, that is wrong because it is lying, but it is more than just lying. In an important sense, it is also stealing, stealing something that belongs to someone else and making it your own.

And if you understand that, then you understand the key to why Jesus spoke to this woman the way he did. God's people, the Jewish people by the first century were a people who had a unique experience in the ancient world. History had known them to be the doormat of the ancient world. They had been slaves in Egypt under Pharaoh, sometime after that, they became captives of the Babylonians, and then the Persians, and then the Greeks and then the Romans. And no one had a right to come along just claim their story as their own. Jesus himself was a part of their story, he was their Messiah, and no one understood the hope for a Messiah in the way the Jews did. You know, if Jesus had told this woman he wouldn't help her daughter for no

other reasons than that she wasn't a Jew that would be racist. The evil of racism is that it is completely arbitrary. The problem with those demented torch bearing souls in Virginia last week is that they pick out ridiculous and arbitrary reasons for discriminating against someone else. But there was nothing arbitrary in Jesus' claim that only the Jewish people had a right to their own particular hope. No one could claim their hope unless they also lived through their long, long nightmare of suffering.

So this my friends, is why Jesus said what he said to the Canaanite woman of this story. But then, our story does not end there. Our story does not end there, but instead, even though this woman had no claim to his powers, our Lord still allows her daughter to be healed. When he says to her "It is not fair to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs", she says, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

And Jesus says to her "Woman you have great faith! Your request is granted" and we are told the demons left her daughter that very hour.

Ultimately, Jesus treated this woman with great compassion in healing her daughter even though she was not part of his people and he was not her Messiah. But one thing about compassion is that sometimes compassion can motivate you to give people a lot more than what you actually owe them. In my capacity as a teacher, I owe it to every student to grade them fairly whether they are white or black male or female, or whether I like them or dislike them. Those who teach for a living will probably understand me when I tell you that one of the things I hate to do as a teacher is give a poor grade to someone I really like. I can't stand doing that. But deep within my soul, I believe that it is wrong to reward some student just because I like them or penalize a student for reasons that have nothing to do with their grades. Let's call

that a sense of justice. But there are a lot of things I don't owe to anybody. I do not owe it to any student for example to give them extra credit. And you do not owe it to a complete stranger to be their best friend, or to buy them gifts, or to have them over to your house. But sometimes, your sense of compassion tells you to go beyond justice as it demands that you do things which you just don't owe anybody. And that is what we have here in this story with Jesus. He doesn't owe it to this woman to give her anything. He wasn't sent to her. But compassion calls him to go beyond the justice of what he owes her.

A short time ago, I baptized baby Maverick Kent. Maverick, of course, does not understand what his baptism is all about, but in our own view of baptism here in the Presbyterian Church, we don't believe that you need to be old enough to know what baptism is all about in order to receive this sacrament. After all, we believe that God's unconditional love for us is not contingent on our ability to have an understanding that love, or even contingent on our ability to know who God is. As we often say in the church, we love because he first loved us. He does not love us because we first loved him.

But we also believe that there is an appropriate response that all of us have to God's love and to being baptized, and that response involves walking with Christ and living as his disciple. Again, Maverick doesn't understand what living as Christ's disciple means yet, but in time, he will, because all of us have promised God to teach him what that discipleship is all about. I have no doubt that we will all keep those vows to him that we have made on this day, and as we do, we will teach him about the Christian virtues of justice and compassion. We will teach him to always treat people fairly, to always give people what is owed to them. But we will also teach

him compassion is sometimes going beyond what he owes, because God has given us so much more than what we are owed. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.