

SERMON TEXT FOR PROPER 15A

PREACHED AUGUST 20, 2017 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXTS: Matthew 15.10-28; Isaiah 56.6-8; Psalm 67; romans 11.1-2a,29-32

Have you ever felt like an **outsider**? Have you been in a situation that was **out of your comfort zone**, somewhere you felt **out of place**, out of your **league** (so to speak), where you sensed that you didn't **belong**? Maybe it was at your **workplace**, at a **social** gathering, as part of a **sports** team or club, in a particular **store** or neighborhood. Perhaps it was even as you attended a **worship** service. Even in **church** there are **insiders** and **outsiders**. Remember how it **felt** to be in those situations.

The Canaanite woman in today's gospel lesson is an **outsider**. She is **alone**, with no male relative to speak for her. She is a **Gentile**, and therefore **unclean** to Jews. And, she is traveling **outside her country** to find help for her daughter – a daughter who, in the ancient world, is considered **worthless** and expendable.

Now, let's be clear: this woman is anything but **shy** and **retiring**. She is **bold**, brash, obnoxious, feisty, **aggressive** and unapologetic as she approaches Jesus. She strategically, clearly and succinctly informs Jesus of her problem: *"my daughter is tormented by a demon."* She does not directly request **healing** for her child; rather, she desires **mercy** - which she **presumes** would take the form of an **exorcism**.

In the previous scene of the gospel, Jesus had taught the crowds - including some Pharisees and his disciples - that a person is **defiled** not by what she puts in her **stomach** but by that which originates in her **heart** and is manifested in her **life** (for example, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, deception). This narrative implies that **one's race, ethnicity, gender, disability, or class does not defile a person**; what defiles them is *"what comes out of the mouth [which] proceeds from the heart."*

So we might – and should - be **surprised** by both Jesus' **silence** and his eventual **response** to the Canaanite woman. Initially, Jesus fails to even **acknowledge** her and her request for mercy. Anyone with a pressing need knows how **horrible** it feels to have a dire or significant request for **help** or **information** met with **dead silence**.

No one **immediately responds** to the Canaanite woman - or even gives the **impression** that they will respond. The **disciples** urge Jesus to **send her away** because they are **annoyed** by her continued **shouting** (a better translation would be **shrieking**) and by her refusal to take **silence** for an answer. Jesus' **eventual** response seems to affirm the desire to just **get rid of her**: *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,"* Jesus says. The

fact that **her** people's blood runs through **his** veins and that **his** people's blood runs through **her** veins **does not move Jesus** one iota! If our common humanity, our **relatedness**, does not move **us**, what will?

The Canaanite woman persists. Like Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, Oprah Winfrey, First Lady Michelle Obama, Senator Elizabeth Warren, and Senator Kamala Harris, the Canaanite woman persisted. She did not **go away**; she would not be **ignored**. She drew closer and knelt, repeating her plea, *"Lord, help me."* Yet her plea for help was met with the language of **cultural difference** and **prejudice**: *"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."*

Still, she persisted, boldly and unapologetically, **challenging** Jesus' prejudices: *"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."* With this **painful**, even **pitiable plea**, the Canaanite woman asks to be **seen and heard**, recognized as a **child of God**.

Through this encounter, she teaches Jesus something about **himself** and his **mission** that is **crucial** for him to learn. Now, we may feel **uncomfortable** with the idea of Jesus **"learning,"** but I can't think of another term that **better** captures Jesus' expanded sense of **mission** at this point in the Gospel of Matthew. If you recall, this gospel ends with the commission to **preach the gospel to all nations**.

The Canaanite woman's **persistence** not only made her daughter **whole**, it also showed Jesus the **larger world** he had come to **listen to** and to **heal**. With this encounter, Jesus was forced **to re-examine** his ministry, his **preconceived notions** about people. Indeed, Jesus **stumbled** a bit with her, but **in the end he got it right**. Had he **not** taken the time to **reconsider** her request, the woman's plea might **never** had been **heard** and **answered**.

What's the **moral** of this story? **Never underestimate the power of a persistent woman and the God in whom she believes.** Just as the Canaanite woman teaches Jesus that **God's mission and vision and compassion and mercy are bigger** than what **he** may have initially imagined, so also the Canaanite woman **instructs us** at this important time in history: a time when **synagogues** are threatened, **mosques** are fire-bombed, **neo-Nazis** and white supremacists march the streets, and hate groups like **Isis** use automobiles as lethal weapons. Every time we draw a line between who's **in** and who's **out**, who's **right** and who's **wrong**, who's **privileged** and who's **not**, we will find that **God is more likely than not on the other side**.

As the Canaanite woman discovered, **knowing** what is right without **speaking** it in some way **is not enough**. Her first plea was met with **silence**. Imagine what would have happened if she had just **turned away**, discouraged, fearful, or defeated. **Would Jesus have sensed God's larger**

mission? Would he have said that the forgiveness he offers through the gift of his body and blood is **"for all"** or just **"for some"**? Would he have imagined that God loved and **sent** him to save the **whole world**, or just **part** of it? We don't know.

We **do** know, however, that this woman **did not retreat to silence**. **She spoke out**, offering a testimony that rings down through the ages: "See me! See me as a **person** - not as a **woman** or a **Canaanite** or a **minority** or a **foreigner** or someone from a different **religion** or as a **burden**. See me as a **person**, as an **equal**, and as a **child of God**." Fortunately, **Jesus did**. The question for **us** is, **will we?**