



THE DAY JESUS ACTED LIKE CHRIS MATTHEWS Matthew 15:21-28

This summer we will be examining those biblical texts where Jesus encounters a variety of persons - or these persons encounter Jesus and they seize the day and moment.

Today we encounter a conversation between Christ and a Canaanite woman where Jesus seems to resemble Chris Matthews more than a man of compassion and tenderness. It gives us a side of Jesus that we are not totally comfortable with. To be quite honest with you, if I were responsible for editing the Bible, I would have left it out. It certainly contains one of the harshest tones of our Lord in the biblical record.

However, because we believe that all of God's word is profitable for teaching and training in righteousness – so we go forward in faith - believing that God will give us a blessing and insight for life from this passage. So let us dig in today!

Keep your Bibles open to our text for today. Notice in **verse 21** it states: "**Leaving the place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.**" Now in **verses 3-20 of chapter 15**, Jesus had just finished a heated pow-wow between himself and the Pharisees (who thought they represented Judaism and faith at its best). However, Jesus had not praised them - but rebuked them - and called them hypocrites in **chapter 15:7**.

Then notice in **verse 16** that Jesus tells the disciples they are dull. It was a tense time. It seems that Jesus, the Pharisees, and the disciples are as hot as the desert they are walking and laboring in.

So in **verse 21**, sensing a time for spiritual refreshment and reflection he goes to a place where he believes he will not be recognized or encountered. He needs a change of scenery. So for the only time in his earthly ministry - he travels outside of his native country.

Now, the cities of Tyre and Sidon were located on the coast of Lebanon. The fact that they were primary targets of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in the Six Day War of 1973 and last year's conflict is proof of their adversarial relationship to the nation of Israel then as well as now. For centuries there has been bad blood between them. Jesus' trip was a trip into dark territory. The last thing that Jesus expected was one of enemies asking for an audience with him to heal someone by the power of faith.

So let us turn now to **verse 22**. It states: "**A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him crying out, 'Lord, son of David, have mercy on me.' My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.**"

Now, remember the Bible teaches us "**to seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near.**" Now, that is exactly what the Canaanite does. She cries out. We know from the book of Exodus and the Psalms that God hears the cries of all people. How easy it is for us to forget this unless it is our cry.

Now, this poor soul has three strikes against her. She came from the wrong place – a despised race, and a hated faith tradition. To make it even more challenging she is a female. She is of the lowest breed of Gentile - a Canaanite. She probably had some contact with the worship of the Baal gods. And to top it off a woman was never to speak to a Rabbi in public. She was outside the covenant community. She is a most unlikely candidate to pursue Jesus.

So, let us look how Jesus responded to her in **verse 23**. It states: "**Jesus did not answer a word.**" Wow, not one - single - solitary - word. That must have been awkward. My mentor in ministry, Eugene Peterson, believes Jesus is engaging in what he calls 'reflective silence.' It is a silence that deepens relationship.¹

I believe that his own disciples - aren't fully aware of who he is - and the true nature of his mission. Further, Jesus is surprised - pleasantly surprised - and he needs some time to sort out his response. After all, this dear soul comes out of nowhere. She is loud and has broken every known law of social decorum of that time. So like Eugene Peterson, his silence is a form of spiritual discernment to reflect on her request. While he does not immediately answer her – he does listen to her. Her request in **verse 22** is important to him.

Whatever the reason for his silence it was taking too long for her. So she turned to the disciples for some help. Perhaps she is hoping that they could be of some help to her as well. Their response is found in the second part of **verse 23**: **Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.** We know that is how the disciples dealt with the children and other beggars who came to Jesus. While Jesus does not send her away – he certainly gives her a somewhat puzzling response.

So in **verse 24**: Jesus responds to her by saying, "**I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.**" You can almost see the disciples say "That's right, Jesus." **Amen!** I will second that. It is here I believe - that Jesus seizes the moment to give the disciples a lesson they will never forget. Jesus knew that his disciples were still struggling to understand the ministry and mission of their Messiah. Bishop William Willimon – as a young pastor – shares how his church initiated a door-to-door visitation program. They wanted to get back in touch with the neighborhood that surrounded the church. Low and behold, it actually worked. People showed up on Sunday morning. Unfortunately, they were the wrong people. The people who came had all sorts of family and personal problems. They were forced to admit that they wanted to grow – but not with these kinds of people. Our Lord knew that we humans always struggle with the boundaries that force us to push beyond the boundaries of race, class, and gender.

What I find incredible is the fact that she does not argue that point with Jesus. She does not dispute the fact - that Jesus had a special mission to the Jews. Somehow it has been revealed to her that this Jewish Rabbi is the Savior of the world.

In **verse 25** she simply falls at his feet and worships him. She knows she must seize this moment. She cries out, "**Lord, help me.**" She is humble and pleads her case. In Matthew's gospel, it is two non-Jewish persons who recognize who Jesus is long before the disciples. This is Matthew's way of sharing the full nature of Jesus' ministry and Messiah-ship. We know in the Great Commission that closes Matthew's gospel in **chapter 28:19**, that the disciples are to go into all the world and baptize in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

So in **verse 26**, Jesus once again sounds more like Chris Matthews than the compassionate and loving Savior we know him to be. Jesus says, "**It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs.**" Talk about hardball politics! Whew! Once again she is not deterred. She knew the spirit of our middle hymn today: "Pass me not O gentle Savior - Hear my humble cry - While on others thou art calling - Do not Pass me by." She will not relent. She says, "**If I am a dog, treat me as a dog and give me the crumbs from your table.**"² Like Jacob, wrestling with God into the wee hours of the morning, she will not let go till Jesus blesses her daughter. When a door seems to close – she keeps on banging. She will not be denied.

She reminds me of a story told about a man in his mid-twenties who dreamed all his life of being a lawyer. He earned his first degree and began the task of applying to law schools. He applied to six of them. One by one they came back – all rejection letters – no admittance. Finally he received the sixth and last rejection letter. However, with a determined spirit, he wrote back in response to the last letter of rejection: "Dear Sirs: I am in receipt of your rejection of my application to law school.

"As much as I would like to accommodate you – I find I cannot accept it. I have already received five rejections from other law schools – and this number in fact, way over my limit. Therefore, I reject your rejection letter and will in fact appear for classes on September 1st." This is exactly the kind of tenacious faith that Jesus finds and commends in this dear soul. This woman seizes the opportunity before her and will let nothing deter her from her honorable goal. Jesus also seizes the moment to teach the disciples a lesson that they would never forget. Jesus knew that we would always struggle with the word 'All.' In this lesson it is Jesus who authorizes the ministry to the Gentile world that Peter and Paul and the other disciples would eventually fulfill.

Yes, Jesus once again shocks his disciples by declaring in **verse 28**: "**Woman you have great faith! Your request is granted.**" Her plea is heard – her prayer is answered. Her faith is lively and vigorous and Jesus was duly impressed.³ Her faith is not a puny thing – but a mighty force in her life.

The disciples were to learn that day - that one's geography, race, and culture did not really matter to God - only "**True faith in Him.**" Jesus went beyond the boundary of Israel that day - so they could go beyond their boundaries of God's love and grace they had set for themselves and no one else. That powerful battle still goes on today in the Holy Lands, South Africa, Ireland,

America and anywhere else where people live by the power of prejudice - rather than the power of faith in a great God who loves all.

This story is to me - an amazing testimony to what the power of hope can do in a person's life. Sometimes it is said that, "the best plant and strongest trees grow in the most barren and difficult of soils."

My friend Tom Butts is absolutely right on when he shares, "There is great power in a faith - that holds onto hope - even when the ground upon which you stand is wet with tears." That certainly describes this dear child of God in our lesson today. She will not retreat – she will not give up.

Yes, with the power of our Resurrection Hope - we should never allow despair to allow us to be put down - put off - or pushed aside.

I am thankful for this story - for it teaches me that greater than the powers of hatred and racism - is the power of God's radical grace.

This story teaches me that humility - and not human tradition - is the way to the heart of God. You can express truth with your lips - but unless it finds its place in your heart it is not real. Dr. Charles Stanley writes, "Great faith does not depend on background or position but on the heart." Jesus had already taught the disciples in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

This story teaches me to simply throw myself at the mercy of the Lord. He will never pass me by or ignore my cry.

This story teaches us: There is more love and grace in God - than there is hatred and sin in us!

Yes, in the eyes of God - there are no foreigners - but one large family of faith.

Thanks be to God!

Amen and Amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: THE MESSAGE BIBLE with its translator**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1512.

² Fred B. Craddock, [et.al], **PREACHING THROUGH THE CHRISTIAN YEAR, YEAR B**, Trinity Press International, Valley Forge, PA, first edition, 1993, page 405.

³ Ibid, Craddock, page 405.

PASTOR'S NOTE: This sermon was preached at both services on June 8th. Pastor Eric will not be preaching on June 15th, but will return to the pulpit on June 22nd.