

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO UNITY IN LIFE

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In the Gospel reading from Matthew, the Pharisees practice of religious purity, especially regarding dietary laws, is contrasted with Jesus ministry that makes the distinction between moral behavior and ritual practice. Jesus notes that evil intentions from the heart, spoken out of our mouths are what defiles a person, not old laws directing the eating of certain foods.¹ What we say, think, act, and behave in the present “here and now,” is more important than following elaborate religious traditions and rituals from the past.

Jesus and His disciples go to the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon in southern Phoenicia, where they are approached by a Canaanite woman. The Canaanites were antagonists, mortal enemies of Israel. This woman stood for everything that is immoral, godless, and religiously unclean in the eyes of the Jewish Jesus, and His disciples. Canaanite people were outcasts, untouchables by traditional Hebrew laws.

Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting. She is trying to attract Jesus’ attention. “Have mercy on me, *Lord, Son of David*:² my daughter is tormented by a demon.” It is noteworthy that the woman uses the words “*Lord, Son of David*” in her approach to Jesus. “*Lord*,” as a form of address is used by Matthew only by those who truly believe in Jesus as the Messiah. The Jewish title *Son of David* would

¹ *Revised Common Lectionary, Episcopal Edition*: Church Hymnal Publishing Co., New York, NY, 2017; *Prayer A: Proper 15*: Matthew 15:19-20

² *ibid.* Matthew 15:22

have no significance for a Gentile; yet ironically it is used by the Canaanite woman, and it appears to signify her understanding of Jesus as the Messiah for her Gentile people. In Matthew's Gospel, this is a sign that while not everyone recognizes the Lordship of Jesus, He is the Messiah for all people.

The initial response of Jesus and the disciples to the first plea of the Canaanite Woman is out of character for our Lord.³ Jesus ignores her and the disciples encourage him to get rid of her, "Send her away." Jesus explains that he cannot help her because He was sent "only to the lost sheep of Israel."⁴ It is interesting that the statement of exclusion of the Canaanite woman restates Jesus exact instructions to the disciples when He was sending them out to evangelize the Jews. Jesus told the disciples "Go not to the Gentiles but Go to the lost sheep of Israel."⁵ In the dialogue of our lesson Jesus rejects the Gentile Canaanite woman.

However, the Canaanite woman will not be put off. She kneels before Jesus, and speaks to Him again as *Lord*, desperate for His help for her daughter. Jesus reply⁶ is even more definitive and so harsh, that it sounds uncharacteristic for Jesus. He refers to the Gentiles as *dogs* who are not worthy to receive the same food- i. e., the benefits of his ministry- as the children of the Hebrews.

The woman will not be deterred, nor does she show anger at what Jesus said. She still addresses Him as *Lord*. She sends His comment back

³ *ibid.* Matthew 15:23

⁴ *ibid.* Matthew 15:24

⁵ *ibid.* Matthew 10:6

⁶ Matthew 15: 26

to Him by noting how “even the *dogs* gather up the crumbs that fall from their *master’s table*.⁷ This part of the discussion is a good example of a popular kind of verbal back and forth common in Hebrew conversation. Here sharp wits, typically match each other, word for word. The Canaanite Woman does not deny that Jesus ministry to His own people might have priority: but she maintains the abundance of God’s blessings and mercies are so vast, there still is room to include the Lord’s healing of Gentiles, like her sick child.

The tension that has been building throughout this exchange reaches its climax,⁸ as Jesus acknowledges the mother’s faith and grants her request. “Woman great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” The Canaanite Woman’s depth of belief is the decisive factor that moves Jesus to look beyond her feminism and nationality to cure her daughter. . The Canaanite mother will not be dissuaded and Jesus final words to her express His approval.

How do we look at this story? Jesus response to the disciples initial admonition to send the woman away with the statement that “He was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” is extremely limiting for His ministry.

Professor Douglas R. A. Hare, of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, who wrote a commentary on *Matthew*, in his commentary points out that Mark the earliest Gospel which was copied by Matthew, omits Jesus statement about being “sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”⁹

⁷ Matthew 15: 27

⁸ Matthew 15:28

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The hardest thing for us to understand in the encounter is Jesus reference to the Hebrews as “children” while the Gentiles are considered to be “dogs.”¹⁰

Professor Hare, cited three ways it is possible to interpret this verse and its context. The first is to simply treat it as inauthentic. Accordingly, the saying was credited to Jesus by conservative Jewish-Christians who were opposed to the Gentile mission.

The second approach treats the story as authentic but argues that Jesus behavior is not so harsh as modern readers think. The saying may have been a proverb that was no more offensive than our common saying, “Charity begins at home.” The Greek word for “dogs” found here is the diminutive, which was used for beloved household pets, and therefore is not to be seen as abusive. However, Aramaic, which Jesus spoke, contained no such diminutive.

The third interpretation insists on accepting the story as it stands in all its harshness. The anecdote presents Jesus as a Jewish man of His day, chauvinistic toward women and non-Jews. His limited perspective is in part corrected by the clever retort of a bold woman, who convinces Him that Gentiles must also share in God’s bounty.¹¹

Some find this passage distressing, because it presents Jesus as responding in an unfeeling, hurtful way lacking compassion for a Gentile woman. She is desperate to find some way of getting rid of the demon that

¹⁰ Matthew 15:26-27

¹¹ Hare, Douglas R. A., *Interpretation, Matthew* :John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1993, pgs.176-177

is plaguing her daughter. There is nothing that upsets us so much and strikes at our hearts, as when we have a child who is sick. It can turn our feelings making us sad, sometimes afraid and even mad. Most people will do everything they can to help a child get well.

Furthermore, if we take the child to a doctor, we do not expect the physician to be prejudiced and insult us because of our race, nationality or pedigree! Yet this is exactly what Jesus did to the Canaanite Woman and her daughter when He referred to Canaanite people as “*dogs.*”¹² Jesus calling the Gentiles *dogs* is a generalization. Does it imply that all Gentile people by nature are inferior to all Hebrew people? Obviously it does not! However, the statement is like a systemic racist remark one hears sometimes today: when it is said or inferred by an example that all white people are superior to all black people, which is out of place and inaccurate. Systemic racial, religious and national generalized elevations and denunciations of groups of people are unfounded, untrue, and have no place in our church or in our country.

There is a subtle broader unrest that we hear in this story. From our days of childhood through Sunday school and attending worship as adults many of us have been led to believe and understand Jesus as a perfect man. He is the Son of God. He is therefore perfect in our minds. Yet we cannot forget Jesus was human. Humans can behave imperfectly. The story of Jesus and the Canaanite Woman clarifies the humanity of Jesus for all of us to see. In the end of the story, we can all take comfort in that Jesus was and is the great healer and physician of our souls and bodies.

¹² Matthew 15:26

Today there is great unrest throughout the world. The Coronavirus has taken thousands of lives and threatens everyone. It is the 21st Century Plague! Like the Hebrews and the Gentiles in our lesson, nations are experiencing division among different people. People of minority races are speaking up. Protests are on the move. Tragically, the non-violent protests are often being infiltrated by violent people who are unrelated to the peaceful marchers.

The insertion of the police gets the whole event mixed up, and tempers flare! The police are in the middle, protecting property and orderly people, while at the same time having to stop an unruly aggressive destructive mob! The police are in a no-win situation, which the country must win. We must pray for the men and women who serve as law enforcement officers. Remember, they are God's people with families.

“BLACK LIVES MATTER” is painted on the street leading to the White House in Washington D.C... In Jesus day if the streets had been paved perhaps “CANAANITE LIVES MATTER,” would have been painted on the street. I do not know why, but I do not believe there is a church named for the Canaanite Woman. We remember the Good Samaritan, and have named churches for him, but he was a faithful “man.” However have we forgotten the Canaanite Woman, because she was a foreign “woman”? In today's age, some might ask, is this systemic religionism, nationalism, sexism, or racism?

The Canaanite Woman was a hero like another prominent Gentile who addressed Jesus as Lord. Remember the Roman Centurion, whose faith resulted in the healing of a devoted servant.¹³ Today, we Gentile

¹³ Matthew 8:5-13

Christians are followers of Jesus Christ our Lord. He is our Savior and we worship Him as the Messiah. Like the Gentile Canaanite Woman and the Roman Centurion, may we have faith that leads us forward and overcomes the obstacles that confront us in our lives. Lord, let us appreciate your many mercies and grant us your peace. *Amen.*

PROPER 15 Sunday closest to August 17; Prayer Book page 232

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; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lies and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. *Amen*

FOR THOSE SUFFERING FROM THE CORONOVIRUS

O God of heavenly powers, by the might of your Son's command, all sickness and infirmity that He met was driven away. May your healing mercies be with all those suffering from the Coronovirus now enveloping the people of your world. Comfort and relieve the suffering that weakness and sickness may be banished, strength restored, good health returned and a cure come to your children and servants. Inspire the scientists to find a vaccination that will destroy this evil virus and end its reign. Bless all those working in the government, the medical and emergency fields, keep them safe and protect them. We thank you for your many blessings and mercy through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

A BIRTHDAY PRAYER FOR JAMES REA MAXWELL 3d

Watch over your servant James dear Lord as his days bless and guide him wherever he may be. Strengthen him when he stands; comfort him when discouraged or sorrowful; raise him up if he fall; and in his heart may thy peace which passes understanding abide all the days of his life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen* *August 16, 1928*

A PRAYER FOR THE HUMAN FAMILY

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Book of Common Prayer, page 815 by Charles F. Price, 1979

THE BLESSING

The peace of God which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be amongst you and remain with you always. *Amen*

THE DISMISSAL Go in peace, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit.
Thanks be to God, Alleluia, Alleluia

GRACE BEFORE MEALS

Dear Lord, we thank you for your goodness and kindness; we thank you for providing for us; let us appreciate your many mercies; we ask your blessing. *Amen*

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