

Sermon
Matthew 15.21-28
11th Sunday after Pentecost • Sunday, August 16, 2011
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Coos Bay

No one can deny that these are tough times. People are out of work, business owners are having to scramble to retain customers while dealing with the new restrictions this global pandemic demands. We all know people who are hurting. Many of you have been extremely generous in donating money to the pastor's discretionary fund so that we can buy gift cards to give to people to help them survive. Violet and I listen to their stories, discuss with each other and then make a determination as to what each person needs. Of course, we realize we can only do so much. And then Violet tracks each donation in one of her files. But on Friday, we got a call from a person who said a job had fallen through and they were leaving the area – could we help with gas? Violet noted that the van that pulled into the parking lot was the same van with that had come to Gloria Dei two days earlier. Slightly different story, and different person on the line – same van. When Violet approached them, she was told that the card she had given them earlier hadn't worked, the machine "couldn't read it." Knowing she was likely being duped and lied to, Violet gave them another card. She was frustrated and a just little bit angry when she walked back into the church office. She said, "Ugh! This is so hard! I don't know how Jesus did it!"

Today's story of Jesus from Matthew is very troubling – we see that even Jesus didn't always handle things so well. A Canaanite woman cries out to Jesus to heal her daughter. By the end of the story, her daughter has been healed -- but between the crying out and the healing, Jesus says some pretty terrible things. He's arrogant, racist and just plain mean. We may want to pass this off as Jesus was "truly human," but I don't think any of us want to hear him being quite **this** human. So over the years, people have tried to clean up this story. One attempt goes something like this: Jesus was testing this woman to see if she had enough faith. When she passed the test, Jesus said, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." That verse has caused plenty of pain because some have heard or inferred Jesus as saying, "If *you* had exhibited more faith, your husband or wife, your mother or father or child would not have died." Basically, you blew it.

But look back of the story, the woman doesn't make any confession of faith. Another option that has been used to soften Jesus' words is that the Greek word kunarios -- translated "dogs" - really means "little dogs, or puppies." So when Jesus tells the woman, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," he really means puppies. Does that help explain his words? There's one more possibility. Because this woman submits to Jesus and kneels before him, Jesus heals her daughter. Go thou and do likewise. It seems that we will do almost anything to make Jesus look and act like someone we want him to be.

But Matthew *doesn't* clean up this story. Matthew dares to give us a very human Jesus and he paints a specific picture of this woman. She is a Canaanite woman. She is not one of Jesus' people. Should we be surprised? Jesus has gone into the region of Tyre and Sidon, two of the more affluent places in the region. And Matthew's choice of the word "Canaanite" to describe her seems a bit strange. By the time of Jesus, people were no longer called "Canaanites." This name was no longer even on the map – it would have been a bit like calling someone from New York a New Amsterdamer! It appears that Matthew chooses "Canaanite" on purpose: not only is this woman seen as the "other," but she is part of an enemy people. Yet this woman seems to know who Jesus is. She has heard the stories about him. And she approaches him to beg him to heal her daughter who is ill.

She's desperate and comes out shouting. If she had been a man, he would have been praised for speaking up, for being assertive. But women who exhibit the same behavior are labeled aggressive and antagonistic and shouters. Some scholars claim that in the First Century, the only women who spoke to men in public were prostitutes. Is labeling people what we do to those who are different from us?

The writer of Matthew describes the woman's daughter as being possessed by a demon. Oh, when the Biblical canon was set in the mid 300s (1700 years ago!) not a whole lot was known about psychology. So we 21st Century people today continue to use language that described something that this long-ago society knew next to nothing about. Someone described as being possessed by demons might actually have been afflicted by epilepsy or Down's Syndrome, or may have been diagnosed as bipolar, anxiety or autism today – none of which is the slightest bit demonic.

Someone once wrote a note to me stating that whatever words we use, people really need to figure out that those with mental illness didn't inflict themselves with the demons. It's not something we can pray it away. No one needs to avert their eyes. Being stigmatized for having a mental illness is exactly like being stigmatized for gay, or for being a person of color, just another weird minority for others to worry about. The onus is on not the person being labeled, but on the person doing the labeling. Someday we'll all get to be just people.

Why, then, do we label people who are different from us? Do we also make them morally suspect? Maybe Matthew wants us to remember Rahab the prostitute who is named in Jesus' genealogy at the beginning of Matthew. She, too, was a Canaanite who lived in the city of Jericho. What's a Canaanite prostitute doing in Jesus' family tree? The simple answer? Jesus was human. The disciples don't want to think about such questions.

They want nothing to do with her: "Send her away!" they tell Jesus.

That's what they tried to do not too many days before when faced with more than 5,000 hungry people. "Send the crowds away," the disciples said. "You give them something to eat," said Jesus. This Canaanite woman isn't going anywhere. She may not be Jewish but she calls out to Jesus in language of the Jewish prayer: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." But Jesus isn't swayed by familiar language. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel," he tells her.

She won't give up. "Lord, help me," she begs. This is where Jesus goes to the dogs: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But the Canaanite woman is feisty and stubborn. (and probably would have been described as steadfast and zealous if she were a man!)

But the life of her daughter is at stake. She picks up Jesus' words and throws them right back at him: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

When Jesus hears this, he says, "Woman, great is your faith!"

But again, she hasn't made any confession of faith. There's no sign she's been born again. **She simply spoke the truth:** "the children *have* been fed – 5,000 men, besides women and children. (Matt. 14: 13-21) Twelve baskets of food were left over, twelve baskets for the twelve tribes of Israel. Surely there's enough for me and my daughter. That's what Jesus finally heard and came to believe. "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter."

Jesus was converted that day to a larger vision of the kingdom of God. Jesus saw and heard a fuller revelation of God in the voice and in the face of the Canaanite woman. The woman's truth is evident in the way Matthew tells this story. At the end of this chapter there is another feeding story. This time 4000 men are fed -- besides women and children -- and there were seven baskets left over. Seven is the number of wholeness, completeness, a perfect number encompassing the nations. Matthew has placed the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman between these two feeding stories. The Canaanite woman taught Jesus that she and her daughter deserve more than crumbs. After this encounter Jesus went on to feed those who had not yet been fed.

If Jesus could be changed, can we? If Jesus can begin to look at others in a new way, can we? Every generation sees some people as "other" and puts them under the table. We could make a long list of people we see as different –different races, different customs, different medical diagnoses, or different religious beliefs. This work IS HARD, but feeding, clothing, and visiting others is what we are called to do. We are called to do this work of helping others while not judging them as other, even if we might not totally believe some of their stories.

Amen.