

Pastor Joe Polzin
 Matthew 15:21-28
 “Crumbs from His Table”
 Year A – Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
 August 20, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Eight verses describing a brief encounter Jesus had with a Canaanite woman. It doesn't take long to read. It might even appear as insignificant as *she* appeared to those around Jesus that day. And yet it ends with a very significant response from our Lord Jesus.

We'll begin at Matthew chapter 15, beginning with verse 21. And as we read through this passage, we're going to find that we accumulate a lot of unanswerable questions. But we're also going to find, by the end, one sufficient answer from Jesus himself.

As we said, it would be easy to overlook this woman. The disciples were trying their best to overlook her, or, at the very least, get her away. And why? Well, she was a Gentile, a non-Jew. And not only a Gentile, but a Canaanite, a descendent of the historical enemy of God's people, Israel. The enemy who, when God led His people across the Jordan River, was supposed to be removed from the land by Israel. The enemy who, when Israel failed to remove them, led them astray in the worship of false gods. What could *this* type of person possibly want with Jesus?

“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David,” she said. “My daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.” And I guarantee, an original hearer of Matthew's Gospel, one well-versed in the long-standing history between Canaan and Israel, would have had a stop-in-your-tracks reaction to what she just said. “Have mercy on me, *O Lord, Son of David*”?

First of all, calling Jesus “Lord” is something only the disciples do in Matthew's Gospel. Second, “Son of David” was a title reserved for the descendent of King David, specifically, the Messiah, the Savior who God promised would come from his descendants. And here, a Canaanite woman, is addressing Jesus as God, as Lord, *and* as the Savior, the Messiah promised to the Israelites. How did a Canaanite like her come to have such faith? Well, here we have one of the many questions we could ask of this relatively brief account.

And you would think such faith would warrant a reaction from the disciples, or at the very least from Jesus. And yet, what do we see? Verse 23, “But [Jesus] did not answer her a word.” Why did Jesus remain silent? We must add it to the list of questions.

And the disciples? Well, they “came and begged [Jesus], saying, ‘Send her away, for she is crying out after us.’” In other words, they say, “Just give her what she wants, give her *something*, Jesus. She is bothering us with her constant crying out to you. Anything to get rid of her.” What did *they* think of her confession of who Jesus is, a confession, by the way, that they often got wrong? Well, another question to the list.

But, surely, Jesus will respond favorably to her now, given what he's heard so far, right? Actually, if she thought his *silence* to her pleas were bad in verse 23, his response to the disciples when he actually *spoke* in verse 24 is even worse for her. “He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’”

Of course, Jesus is speaking an important truth. He *had* only been sent as Israel's Messiah. And while *we* know today what implications his identity as Israel's Messiah and Savior has for us and for the whole world, we cannot forget the importance of the fact the he was first

and foremost sent to Israel. He was sent in fulfillment of the promises that were made to the Israelites, beginning with Abraham, all the way down the line to David. As Matthew himself begins his Gospel, chapter one, verse one, “Jesus [is the] Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Israel’s promised Messiah was here for *them*. And Jesus’ arrival to them demonstrated that God is in the business of keeping His Word.

What tone of voice, what emotional state of mind did this woman have, this mother, who wanted so badly some relief for her demon-oppressed daughter, when she heard Jesus’ words, and in verse 25, “came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me’”? Another question.

But once more, Jesus responds, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” Is Jesus intentionally insulting her, not only calling her a dog because she is an outsider, but also stating “it is not right” according to God’s purposes to help someone like her? Another question.

But then, then the woman says one last statement, one more expression of her unexpected faith in Israel’s Messiah and Lord, that causes Jesus to say, “O woman, great is your faith!” And it’s a statement that our English translations of the Bible get wrong. In our translations, it has her saying, “Yes, Lord, *but...*” or “Yes, Lord, *yet...*” as if she is correcting Jesus, or adding to what he has said. But she is not. She’s not arguing with Jesus.

The word that connects her “Yes,” with what she says following, is the Greek word, *gar*, which is always translated in English as “for” or “because.” “Yes, Lord, *because* even the dogs eat the crumbs...” or, “Yes, Lord, *for* even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” She is *not* contradicting Jesus. She believes wholeheartedly what he has said and agrees with him. And this makes perfect sense with her confession so far of who Jesus is, both “Lord” and “the Son of David,” Israel’s Messiah.

New Testament scholar and professor, Jeffrey Gibbs, paraphrases the meaning behind her incredible statement in verse 27. He writes, it’s as if she said, “Yes, Lord! You are absolutely right! It would be bad indeed to try to deny or contradict God’s plan to save his ancient people Israel. You are Israel’s Messiah, and the bread you give belongs to the children. I agree and believe, and I don’t want the children’s bread, because when the children eat, the dogs also get to eat, don’t they? They bread of the Messiah is so abundant and so overflowing that parts of it fall from the table onto the floor. Everyone should know that—I know that. The bread belongs to the children, and when the children eat, the crumbs fall on the floor and belong to the dogs. And the crumbs are enough for me and my daughter. We need nothing more than the crumbs that fall from the Master’s table.”¹

Jesus had come to feed the children of Israel, physically and spiritually. We had just witnessed it in the feeding of the five thousand. But this Gentile woman knew and believed that this still meant something for *her*.

“Then Jesus answered her, ‘O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.’ And her daughter was healed instantly” (15:28). When Jesus marvels at someone’s faith, we take notice. It was only a chapter previous, that one of his disciples, Peter falters twice on the water, and Jesus said to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” (14:31). Yet, here, it’s a Canaanite woman, speaking like both a disciple and an Israelite, who is commended for her faith.

Which causes us to consider, in a passage riddled with questions, the one sufficient answer that is provided at the end. Which is the answer to the question, what does “great faith” believe? And the answer is this, that great faith believes two things. First, that Jesus is Lord, and second, that even the “crumbs” of Israel’s Messiah are sufficient for us.

¹ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2-20:34*, Concordia Commentary series, St Louis: CPH, 2010, p. 787.)

It's probably not hard for you to sympathize with this woman, this mother with an oppressed daughter. It may not be hard for you to imagine, or even remember, a situation when you felt like the Canaanite woman. When it was all you could do to call out to God, and say, "Have mercy on me, O Lord!"

And like in this passage, in life at times we can be left with more questions than answers. The questions we have for God, why He answers us the way He does, the times of seeming silence, or the things that happen opposite the way we thought they would be. It can bring us to our knees, as we say, "Lord, help me."

But great faith, in the midst of these times, believes two things. First, that Jesus is Lord. He is the creative Word of God, the second person of the Trinity, and the Messiah promised to the people Israel. His people rejected him, sentenced him to death, and crucified him. Yet, *as* Lord, Jesus rose from the dead, proving he is Lord even over death. And he ascended into heaven, from where he rules, and from where he will return one day in glory to judge all things.

And confessing Jesus as Lord, as the woman did, is also confessing that *we are not*. Therefore, we do not get to define who Jesus is, or what he does. We do not get everything that *we* desire. Things do not always go according to *our* will. But because he is Lord, they always go according to his will. And so, we trust in him, even when we do not understand.

Great faith believes Jesus is Lord, and also believes that even the "crumbs" of our Lord, Israel's Messiah, are sufficient even for us. This woman knew that Jesus had come to provide all things for Israel. He fed them. He healed their diseases. His vicarious death would pay the price for their sin. His resurrection meant that salvation and restoration had come to them, despite the previously unbreakable reality of death. The words of Isaiah from our Old Testament reading were being fulfilled in Christ, that he is the "Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel..." (56:8).

But what this woman saw happening was that when the children of Israel were fed, the abundance was so great, that the rest of the world would feast on the crumbs that would fall. Isaiah says, "The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, 'I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.'" In other words, the salvation Jesus brought to Israel would end up also being the salvation for the whole world.

The apostle Paul writes in Ephesians, "The mystery [of Christ] is that Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (3:6). We are Gentiles, not Jews, we are dogs, outsiders... but our sins are also forgiven, we are healed, our physical and eternal death is averted... we are fed by the Messiah.

The Canaanite woman knew this, and Jesus commended her great faith. Despite the questions, despite the silence, despite the answers that seemed opposite, her faith trusted that who Jesus was and what he had to offer, even the crumbs from his table, were sufficient for her. And it was, for the healing of her daughter, but even more, for the healing of her soul.

And though *our* lives can be filled with questions, silence, and answers that seem opposite, we too have been given faith to believe that who Jesus is and what he has to offer, even the crumbs from his table, are sufficient for us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.