

# ***Family Time Interrupted***

August 16, 2020

St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania

Pastor James Haun

## **Matthew 15:21-28**

*Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.*

The account of Jesus and the Canaanite woman is a troublesome passage which keeps reappearing in our rotation of readings, and like this persistent woman, causes repeated headaches. At first glance this is a difficult scripture, and as with the woman of Canaan we just don't know what to do with her. The story tells of a woman who annoyed the disciples and then put Jesus in a difficult spot. Jesus' discussion with her was an abrasive exchange, which like any heated argument leaves the listeners feeling unsettled. How tempting it is to ignore this reading, but God will not let us. Here it is before us, and we are left to wrestle with it. But we need not fear, for there is much more to this reading than first meets the eye. It is plain to see that it presents us with a happy ending—the restoration of this poor demon-tormented girl. At a closer look we can see a happy Canaanite woman, and next to her a happy Savior. We too easily overlook that there is a joy to be shared with all who will draw near! Let us take a closer look at this jewel from Matthew's Gospel.

The initial challenge to understanding this event is to realize the significance of the setting. It was much more than Jesus merely walking down any road to any destination. This is best understood as Jesus finally enjoying good family time with the disciples. I trust that you are all familiar with the meaning of family time. These are the uninterrupted moments where the family is all together and able to encourage, strengthen and catch up on one another, and this is *very* important time! It can be a grand getaway like a vacation, or much more likely, the peaceful times spent grocery shopping, dining, or enjoying a quiet evening at home. One need not

have a nuclear kind of family to understand and cherish family time, for this refers to the important kind of together time which keeps any team or group of friends in harmony.

Jesus had been trying to get away from the crowds and from interference for quite a long time, and a number of attempted escapes were foiled by persistent crowds. He finally resorted to leaving the country! *Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.* They were now strolling through the Gentile lands that lay beyond Israel's borders in search of much needed quiet and rest, and important sessions of teaching for his disciples. The end of the Savior's earthly ministry was beginning to come into view and it was crucially important that these twelve be taught all they need to know for the lifetime ahead which they were to spend building the Church. And now, just as they were beginning to taste the sweet rest and refreshment of time away, there came a visitor. *Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.'*

Now what? Once again, any hope of quiet time was destroyed, and Jesus may have wondered if he could ever find the briefest escape from the relentless pursuit. Many have spoken critically of Jesus for the way that he handled this situation, for as we will see, Jesus spoke harshly to this desperate woman. Let it first be understood that Jesus may very well have been feeling that he was at his wit's end. This was not just a matter of Jesus being temperamental or cranky from fatigue. Jesus was desperate to pause and regroup with his team for this was crucial to the success of his ministry. This is what God the Father wanted him to do! And as we consider Jesus' frustrations, let us remember the times when we have been deprived of our necessary rest and re-orientation for long periods of time. This is an important matter.

What is a Savior to do? Matthew explains the crux of the problem. *But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.'* He answered, *'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'* Here we see the rules of the game laid out, and they don't add up! Jesus was sent to minister to the people of Israel. With his death, resurrection and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost the Good News would then go forth to all peoples, but for now Jesus was to serve the Jews. He knew this to be the Father's will! But Jesus also knew that love and compassion could not be brushed aside. The disciples found this woman quite annoying and were ready to send her away. Jesus remained silent. I am convinced that he was struggling mightily to know God's will. He was genuinely stuck in a difficult place and decision. This is the setting for the difficult and intense conversation which followed.

As the Canaanite woman moved in on the conversation and reasserted her plea, Jesus stuck by his understanding of God's plan. *But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' He answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'* Jesus stood by the rules, for rules are there for a reason! Had Jesus become lax in his time of prayer and fellowship with God, or his time with the disciples, or in his focus upon the nation of Israel, his ministry would not have had the success which it did. Jesus was following a plan and not a haphazard path of random turns and new directions. The wise come to see the value of rules as a guide for life without which we would lose our way. But we also know that rules have their limits. A woman cries out on behalf of her daughter who is in great torment and agony. Even the strictest of rules might be overturned by a greater need and a higher good to be served, and what higher need and good than love and compassion?

The woman played her cards well as she continued her heart felt plea for her daughter, and responded to Jesus' words with real wisdom. *She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'* She knew that she was not a Jew and among those whom Jesus had come to serve, at least immediately, but she humbly pleaded that she could be granted some small residue of Jesus' love and care.

Jesus was stunned by her request. He complimented her for her insight and faith, and just as happened with the centurion whose servant he had healed (chapter 8), he was shocked by the faith which shone brightly among those who were allegedly so far from God. *Then Jesus answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.'* And her daughter was healed instantly. Her daughter was healed and this pleading mother now had the double blessing of not only having her prayer granted, but of winning the praise of the Savior! And let us remember that along with this joy among this Gentile family, Jesus was refreshed and delighted. This story so shocks us with its rough dialogue that we too easily overlook the joy with which it all concluded.

This is a story of a joyous day, but it is much more than just a day's worth of happiness, for here we find a message of hope for our everyday lives. This incident reminds us how God's will seems to be accomplished even amid all of life's messes, conflicting rules and difficult situations. Like Jesus we seek to set a course for our lives, for our families, our finances and for our work. We make careful note of various rules and wise guidelines which we may garner from the Bible, Christian traditions, and guidance from parents and elders. Perhaps we have read some books penned by wise Christian authors and feel that we have a certain aspect of life all figured out. Then life happens. Our plans are suddenly challenged. The schedules we had carefully arranged are disrupted by a string of unforeseen events. The rules which we thought would always give us clear guidance don't seem to work on the situations before us. It has been said that every battle plan works perfectly until one engages the enemy!

Jesus' tussle with the Canaanite woman is such an affirming passage for it sanctifies our many daily dilemmas! Life is full of so many good rules, but these good rules and guidelines can create such conflict. I remember as a high school student taking some classes in first aid which taught me much about life's conflicting principles. Emergency medicine was making great advances in that time as the old "scoop and run" ambulance methods of the past were being replaced by a much more careful method of moving victims. We were being repeatedly told *not* to move a victim when there was any suspected back or neck injury, and this new teaching set into my mind just a little too firmly. I was afraid to touch a victim for fear that I was harming them, and was at a loss to figure how to extricate them from an accident scene! Such it is with rules. A Christian might study the Bible and its teachings on thrift and savings, and then be challenged by verses calling for extravagant generosity. These are all wonderful teachings, but they do not always fit together in a simple and easy way. In these days of the COVID virus we are all doing our best to make sense of the rules of distancing and masks, while trying to tend to life's necessities and to be a Christian witness of love and care. I'm learning a lot about rules in these days as I find many who keep the rules with a great strictness, while others take them so lightly that they hardly matter! Certainly, the truth lies somewhere in between and we continue our struggle to do the right thing. We so try to do the right thing, but life is so confusing.

Jesus' struggle to understand and obey the Father speaks a wonderful peace to us in our confusion, and even in our crankiness! When we feel caught between two sets of rules it is easy to become overwhelmed with guilt feelings. Next time that happens, remember Jesus' difficult search for God's will. And frequently consider, in all of life's messy situations—maybe God's will is actually getting done in spite of all the mess.

Jesus's exchange with the Canaanite woman was ugly, but the outcome was nothing short of beautiful. There is hope for us in our gritty encounters with life and all its unsolvable issues.