

## Sermon: Throw It to the Dogs

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, on August 20, 2023)

A man is having a chat with God. “O Lord, how long is a million years?” God answers, “To me, its about a minute.” “O Lord, how much is a million dollars?” “To me, it’s a penny.” The man then prayed, “Lord, may I have a penny?” God replied, “Sure, all you have to do is to wait a minute.”

It’s a silly joke, I know, yet it highlights the double questions of “What is it we are praying for?”, and “How long shall we wait for the Lord?”

Brother and sisters in Christ, we continue to follow Jesus, in the lectionary reading of the week, through the Gospel of Matthew chapter 15, to the region of Tyre and Sidon, where Christ and the disciples encountered a persistent, some might even describe as a pushy, hackling woman of Canaanite origin.

You may recalled the story of the feeding of the five thousands then the story of Peter walking on water last week. Both took place in and around the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus first began his earthly ministry. Yet, in today’s story, which is recorded in both Matthew 15 and Mark 7, we found Jesus in an unusual and puzzling location, in the Gentile territory of Tyre and Sidon, just south of the modern day city of Beirut, Lebanon.

The port cities of Tyre and Sidon occupied an interesting place in the history of Israel. In the late Bronze Age (about 9th to 10th century Before Christ), they were undoubtedly two of the most important cities in the Phoenicia maritime trade network of the Mediterranean. In the time of David and Solomon, the twin cities enjoyed a relatively good relationship with Israel, supplying the needed construction materials to build the first temple in Jerusalem. However, since that time, as Israel was locked into a protracted and adversarial conflict with the Kingdom of Aram (the modern day Syria), the strategically located Tyre and Sidon, and their plentiful trade resources were likely used, often, against Israel.

A number of Biblical prophets prophesied against Tyre and Sidon, most notably Ezekiel. The people of Tyre and Sidon had become overtly confident in their natural island defences and overtly proud of the wealth and beauty of their cities. They developed a feeling of jealousy and rivalry toward Jerusalem, and delighted in the misfortunes she faced and even tried to exploit them for commercial opportunity. For those reasons, Ezekiel foretold a time when nations would lay siege against them and destroy their

pride and joy, this happened shortly after, under the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon.

In the time of Jesus, the rebuilt Tyre and Sidon were portrayed in somewhat of a better light. In Mark 3 and Luke 6, as Jesus was gaining fame because of what he was doing, a great number of people came to Jesus, including the citizens of Tyre and Sidon. In another part of the Gospel, when Jesus was pronouncing 'woe' over the unrepentant towns of Israel, Tyre and Sidon were held up as a hypothetical model, "*For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes.*" (Matthew 11:21, Luke 10:13)

Coming back our passage today, there was, however, no indication that Jesus travelled to Tyre and Sidon to make good on that hypothetical ministry - he wasn't there to preach repentance in light of the coming Kingdom of God. In fact, Matthew informed us that Jesus 'withdrew' to the region. In the parallel passage of Mark, the Gospel writer was even more illustrative, "[Jesus] entered a house and did not want anyone to know it."

However, Jesus could not keep his presence a secret. A Canaanite woman came to him, crying out, "*Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.*" (Matthew 15:22) How dare a triply unclean woman even thought of petitioning Jesus, a well regarded Jewish Rabbi! Not only was she a Gentile, a woman, and her daughter was demon-possessed! I am speaking of course from the perspective of the Jewish custom at that time. From that perspective, we could understand the silent treatment Jesus gave, for he 'did not answered a word'.

Notice, it was the disciples who became impatient, was annoyed, irritate enough, that they came to Jesus and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.' Oh, the irony of a foreigner addressing Jesus as 'Lord', contrasting to the disciples commanding Jesus as if he was their servant.

To that cruel demand, Jesus added a different layer of cruelty, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Evidently, Jesus understood the demand of the Torah, he saw his ministry as consistent with the prophetic ministries of Israel's past. He was sent by God to save the lost children of God, namely the covenantal Israel. Until the remnant of Israel is fully redeemed, he had no time to waste on the Gentiles, much less on a woman who did not know her place.

Disciples' cruelty may be psychological, the cruelty Jesus demonstrated in that statement was theological. But the woman was persistent, putting into deed her previous word of proclaiming Jesus as 'Lord', she came and knelt down before him, pleading a second time, "*Lord, help me!*" she said. What follows, in my opinion is one of the most offensive, and perhaps most difficult passage to digest. In verse 26, Jesus replied, "*It is not right to take the children's bread and **throw it to the dogs.***"

**Throw it to the dogs!** Let us pause here for a minute, and let those words sink in a little bit more. Children refers to the Israelites who enjoy a unique and covenantal relationship with God. Bread is salvation that which reconciles people to God, thus ushering an everlasting Shalom. Dogs are of course referring to the Gentiles, who are underserving of God's mercy and compassion. Even if they were to be included in God's overall economy of grace, they would only occupy a very tiny fraction, not worthy of wasting the Messiah's precious time.

That statement was highly offensive, truly insulting, to both the modern and ancient sensibility. To that particular Gentile dog, that Canaanite woman.....'Shoo! Go away!' Anyone, facing such an injustice, such a power imbalance, insulted in such a way, would've stormed out in protest — teeth clenching, tears streaming, fist pounding — but not this Canaanite woman. She calmly, humbly and wisely, retorted 'Yes, but...'

Agreeing with Jesus, but nevertheless, inviting him to reconsider the breath and depth of God's love for the world, and for all humanity. In verse 27, "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Yes I am not disputing your understanding of God's plan for salvation, I am not questioning your principled statement of faith concerning your call, But isn't the grace and the blessing of God so vast and inexplicable that even the largest cup would bound to overflow?

To that response, in verse 28, then Jesus said to her, "*Woman, great is your faith! Your request is granted.*" And her daughter was healed at that moment. Her prayer was answered positively, and she didn't even need to wait one minute.

Many biblical scholars had interpreted this passage as Jesus testing the faith of the Canaanite woman. Some even boldly claimed that the faith of the woman somehow opened the eyes of Jesus, and changed the Lord in a very concrete way. I am not going in that direction, I won't claim to know the mind of Christ, our Lord and Saviour. What I will say is that the

faith of this Canaanite woman, in this encounter with Jesus, changed the way Christian faith was practiced — sort of the tipping point of an irreversible cascading process. Starting from the Lord himself, carried on through the Apostolic tradition, particularly of Peter and Paul, all people, Greeks or Jews, men or women, would eventually be welcomed into the Church, into the Kingdom of God. In a very real way, we all have this Canaanite woman to thank, for the way she demonstrated her faith. No longer are we fenced out as gentiles, fighting for scraps of God's salvation, we now have a seat at the table of grace.

This story, should serve as a reminder to us, whenever we find ourselves embroiled in any kind of theological debate on who has a seat at God's table, whether it be the ordination of women, the inclusion of LGBTQ+ community, or the struggle for justice for Black and Indigenous lives. We are all sinners under the grace of God. None of us are worthy, yet we are all invited by Jesus, the Host.

John Calvin, in his biblical commentaries, had this to say about the greatness of faith of this Canaanite woman: "She not only recognized the actual office of Christ, and ascribed to him heavenly power, but pursued her course steadily through formidable opposition; suffered herself to be annihilated, provided that she held by her conviction that she would not fail to obtain Christ's assistance; and, in a word, so tempered her confidence with humility, that, while she advanced no unfounded claim, neither did she shut against her the fountain of the grace of Christ, by a sense of her own unworthiness."

This commendation, bestowed on a woman who had been a heathen, in Calvin's language, this summary is truly remarkable. God did something new through this Canaanite woman. Her prayer maybe simple, her interaction with Jesus maybe short. She certainly did not understand the subsequent impact of her action, Yet her faith, yes it still is a gift of God, is truly transformational. For that, we give thanks to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen**