

"Who Does She Think She Is?"

Gen. 45:1-15; Ps. 133;

Matt. 15:21-28

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Jesus has just been talking about issues of purity and how clean hands doesn't necessarily create a pure heart. The leaders of the purity party in the Pharisaic tradition have just come up short - - again, in their attempts to "best" Jesus.

Now Jesus and the disciples are heading out of the Jewish lands toward the Mediterranean seashore. Are they on vacation? Are they trying to get away from the press of people and programs? Could they more easily turn away requests from needy people because they were out of town?

It looks like they tried. But a woman approached Jesus to beg for his help. Oddly, he didn't even reply to her. Seeming to take the lead from Jesus, the disciples urge him to get rid of her because she is shouting at them and making a scene.

Jesus makes a comment about his job description and how he was sent by God only to the lost sheep of Israel. Not to be put off, the woman continues to press him and by the end of the conversation her persistence has paid off and her daughter is healed.

That's the story, but what are we to make of it? Who does this woman think she is? Does she think she can shout her way into an audience with Jesus? Apparently so. Who do the disciples think they are? Are they the bouncers at the entrance door to Jesus?

They may want to try and control things, but they are usually rather ineffective at crowd control. This story is no exception.

Who does Jesus think he is? He's just fed thousands and walked on water. Now he seems unwilling to do a rather simple thing.

This story makes us wonder how it got past the censors. We believe that Jesus is fully God and fully human, but this portrayal of Jesus may raise eyebrows and make us ask questions.

Can God's mind be changed? If we were to spend time thinking about that question we would have to weigh some other texts like the story of Abraham bargaining with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis, Chapter 18, and the text from the book of Hebrews reminding us that Jesus Christ "is the same yesterday, today and forever."

But this text does more. This text does not give us a very flattering picture of Jesus. He is the One who had time for everyone, who even let the children come near.

By this time in Matthew's Gospel Jesus has already been visited by the magi who may be said to represent the non-Jewish world drawing near to the world's Messiah. He has also already healed the Centurion's slave, so he isn't indifferent to the needs of non-Jews.

But here in this story, at first he ignores a woman in need, then he tells her that her request isn't part of his job description and then he equates her with a dog.

If you had been her, when might YOU have given up? What kind

of faith did it take for her to be persistent, not take "no" for an answer and then go toe-to-toe with Jesus in a verbal test of wits before he agreed to do what she asked?

To be as fair as possible to Jesus, he has been very busy lately. It almost looks like he is taking a break from all the teaching and healing and feeding of thousands. People have hounded him at every turn and have not shown much faith in the process, only a desire to have their needs met. He and his disciples have journeyed away from Israel into the lands of the non-Jews along the Mediterranean coast by Tyre and Sidon.

Was he hoping for some R&R, a chance to remain incognito in a foreign land? If so, it wasn't going to happen, because unless he exchanged his robes for a swimming suit and his prayer shawl for a beach towel, it wouldn't be too hard to identify him and his followers as observant Jews slumming among the Gentiles.

His dress and demeanor would make him as easy to pick out of a crowd as a Hassidic Jew in the middle of New York City

The woman who approached him was also easy to identify. Matthew tells us she is a Canaanite. That's an old term that stirs up all the old hatreds between the Jews and the other people of the land. Someone has said it would be comparable to calling someone from Norway a "Viking". If you were Irish and heard that title you just might remember the raids of the longboats and the burning of villages.

Matthew could not have been more up-to-date if he had called her a Palestinian. That term does for us what the term "Canaanite" did for his first audience of Jewish Christians. When

we hear the term "Palestinian" we cannot help but form a picture in our minds and, if we were Israelis, chances are the picture would not be a favorable one.

Titles and terms like "Canaanite" or "Palestinian" carry baggage. They not only place a person outside of Israel; they mark them as anti-Israel. Right from the start she is portrayed as an enemy who should be suspect.

But she is desperate. How desperate do you have to be to do something desperate? Desperation takes many forms. It can be the desperation that comes from unpaid bills and no idea of where the money will come from.

It may be the desperation that is part of a hopeless situation and it seems like the only rational thing to do is to do something irrational.

What does it take for us to become desperate? When we are on the road and there are no gas stations in sight and the needle has long past "E"? When the pain in our jaw or in our back or in a joint has kept us up for hours and now it has suddenly jumped to a new level of intensity and we can't lay our hands on the pain medicine?

When our child is ill and nothing seems to be working...?

This woman was desperate and she loved her daughter. That is a powerful combination, strong enough to cause her to ignore protocol, forget boundaries, and do what needed to be done to help her daughter.

So she risked everything to come to Jesus with the confidence

and the faith that he could do for her daughter what he had already done for others.

And so she cries out: "Kyrie Eleison! Lord, have mercy, Son of David!" Was she making a faith claim or was she just buttering Jesus up? Here she is naming him with titles that say: "You are the Messiah, the One from God." Hardly anyone in the whole Gospel story has identified him in this way. Even the disciples have been unsure of his identity. At every turn in Israel, the people he came for have mostly wanted something from him. They haven't been too interested in worshiping him as Messiah and Lord.

Leave it to this Canaanite woman to name him for who he is and to risk everything by believing in him.

But this doesn't even provoke a response from him. He is silent. Still, she refuses to give up. In a sense the faith she has is not just faith in Jesus. It is faith in herself too. She is willing to take a risk and to say, "Listen to me! I Matter! . . .

And so does my daughter."

Her faith in herself allows her to take incredible risks as she acts on her faith in Jesus. She is absolutely sure that he is there for her too. As she perseveres and ultimately receives what she needs we might wonder, in fact, whether she has faith that Jesus is more than he himself thinks he is. She believes that he is not just sent for the lost sheep of Israel; he is here for the lost sheep of the world.

Her faith may not be the kind that comes through the front doors of the church and gets welcomed to the table, but her faith was sufficient for her to take the risk and challenge the

boundaries that anyone, even Jesus, might place around the love of God.

Rather than getting frustrated or angry, she uses humor and tenacious perseverance to open up a door that you and I are privileged to walk through. She proves that her faith is genuine and that believing in Jesus Christ trumps everything else.

She is one of the reasons why you and I and anyone else who is outside the bounds of God's first family (meaning the people of Israel) also have a place at the table of God's grace.

This woman is the patron saint of full access. Because of her risky behavior, walls are torn down and all (even Jesus?) are reminded of the danger of determining that anyone is or is not a part of God's plan to redeem and to save.

There are lessons here that Matthew and the early Church did not want to forget: "Insiders beware! - Judge not, lest you be judged. Outsiders be brave! - take the risk, remember that you matter to God and if Jesus can change his mind about you, the Church better be ready to do so as well."

Let all draw near: people from East and West, from North and South, confident that whenever we gather around God's table in faith, no one receives crumbs, but all are fed.

Who did she think she was? She thought she was a child of God and worthy of God's gracious care. And she was right.