

## Jesus Changes His Mind

What a joyful day! In just a few minutes we are welcoming the newest Episcopalian to our community; and a joyful noise is being heard again in St John's. I think I actually heard people singing! Change is in the air – can you sense it? What better day to consider the parable of the Canaanite Woman! After all, change is a theme in this passage. This fits nicely with my last sermon, doesn't it? I promise this one will be far less than 39 ½ minutes. Unless I get carried away, of course.

I have to admit, this parable makes me uncomfortable. It challenges my image of a Jesus who is perfect; who is devoid of human frailty; who is always loving, kind and welcoming to all who seek him. I do not really want to consider this other Jesus. The Jesus who dismisses someone in need because she is not the right kind of person.

I do not care for a Jesus who not only rejects someone, but insults her in the process. A Savior with such bad manners does not work well for me. I prefer a Jesus who is loving; kind and forgiving. But that does not mean we cannot learn from this Jesus about doing God's work in the world.

So, let's consider what writer of the Gospel trying to show us with this story? It is such short passage – almost a vignette. Coming after the feeding of the 5,000 and the conflict with the Pharisees over cleanliness laws, its 8 verses might be overlooked. But like so many of our Gospel readings, it is rich with potential lessons.

Now, some scholars explain Jesus' rude behavior as intentional. Some say he was testing the Canaanite Woman's faith. Others say Jesus was teaching her humility – after all her actions were certainly audacious considering the status of women in that culture. Perhaps his response is an indication of his inner struggles about whether or not to minister to the Gentiles. I, too, can infer all kinds of reasons for his reaction. If I had been in his place, I would probably be frustrated after those intense encounters with the Pharisees. I would be tired from all the

traveling and probably anxious about being in a foreign land (Tyre and Sidon) . That is more than enough to make me irritable. But, applying Occam's Razor (all other things being equal, the simplest explanation is probably the correct one) I came to another conclusion. Jesus' humanity was showing. And, it is this human side of Jesus that engaged the Canaanite Woman.

Thanks be to God for the Canaanite Woman. Until his encounter with her, Jesus' mission was among the Israelites. Here was this outsider asking for him to do something that he believed only his own kind deserved. The audacity of her. Not only was she a woman, but a Canaanite!

Remember the stories from the OT? At the end of the Exodus, the Israelites arrived in the Promised Land. Before they could claim it, God instructed them to clear out of those idol worshipping heathens that lived there. So, Joshua led his army through Canaan razing cities and killing all the inhabitants and destroying all their possessions. The ancient world's equivalent of ethnic cleansing. Nothing was supposed to be left of the original inhabitants. The Canaanite woman may have been descended from the remnant of those original inhabitants of the land the Romans called Judea. Or, even more simply, perhaps the Gospel writer chose to describe her this way to show just how different she was from Jesus and the disciples. It was certainly not meant to be a compliment.

Back to the Gospel story. The disciples had already tried to send her away. She had apparently made enough of a nuisance of herself that the disciples called on Jesus to send her away. But the Canaanite Woman would not be deterred from her mission – saving her daughter. And she believed that Jesus was the one who could help – She certainly saw him as more than just a Jewish peasant. She even called him by a royal title. She believed it was possible and she was willing to do whatever it took. She persisted. She even accepted the implied insult of being compared to a dog. And then, clever woman that she was, turned it around on Jesus, challenging his compassion.

Then comes the first miracle. *Jesus changes his mind*. He reconsidered his mission. His vision expanded and he stepped outside the confines of ministering

only to his own kind. Then came another miracle – the daughter was healed. We tend to overlook the first one and focus on the healing miracle, but let's take a further look at this first miracle.

In the passage from Isaiah we heard today, we heard a message of inclusion. God will bring foreigners and the outcasts of Israel into the fold because God's house "shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." Not some. Not just the Israelites. *All peoples*. God says, "Keep justice and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come and my deliverance will be revealed." Foreigners and outcasts included as long as they join themselves to the Lord. Even the Psalmist calls for inclusion of Gentiles in divine favor and blessings. "Let your ways be known upon the earth, your saving health among *all* nations."

Jesus would have known these scriptures. Although the practice in the Jewish community of the 1<sup>st</sup> century was for Jews to hold themselves apart from others, Jesus would have known God did not require it. That knowledge allowed him to consider the pleas of the Canaanite Woman.

How do we use this lesson in our lives as Christians living in an increasingly secular world? Don't worry, the lesson still applies. You see, the Canaanite Woman is still with us just as Jesus is still with us. Can't you hear her voice? She is still with us today asking for healing from us - the body of Christ.

We encounter her every day in the world: the homeless man; the battered woman; the Latino laborer looking for work; the hungry child; the marginal; the differently-abled. The one we believe is not deserving of our attention because of race, religion, class or sexual orientation. The sick; the broken; the rejected. The one who makes us uncomfortable. The one we fear. The one we hate. They are all the Canaanite Woman of our time.

Being Christ's body in the world is so much more than saving souls and going to church. We are to do, with the gifts God has given us, what Jesus did. Heal the sick, feed the hungry, comfort the sorrowful, welcome the stranger. Those are not easy tasks in our world. Living the Gospel may put us in direct conflict with prevailing social and political ideas. We may have to step outside our self-concerns

and the turn off the chatter of fear-fueled voices in order to hear God's call. We may actually have to live into the truth we so readily proclaim, but too often fail to live: that we are all God's children – even those who are not like us.

The recent passage of Alabama's HB54 is a perfect example of this conflict. How do we as followers of Christ reconcile the commandment to love our neighbor and follow the call to service from Matthew 25 to do for "the least of these" with the requirements of this law that criminalizes the work of the Gospel if we help someone who is in this country illegally? Here is the conflict. We profess to be a Christian nation, yet here we have legislation that prevents us from practicing what God calls us to do. I ask myself, "What would Jesus do in this situation?" I think we know. Can we really do no less and remain in integrity with our professed faith?

So today I challenge you. As you go through life this week, start to notice where your life intersects with the outcast and the different. Those people you do not want to deal with. That is the Canaanite Woman you are encountering. Then in your spiritual practice, consider these ideas.

- Who is your Canaanite Woman? What is she asking of you? Perhaps that is a clue to your God given gifts.
- A wisdom teacher once said that when the student is ready, the teacher comes. Is she in your world to teach you something God wants you to learn? Are you ready to learn from her?
- What is God calling you to do about the Canaanite Woman you encounter? As you challenge yourself to engage the idea of the Canaanite Woman, remember Jesus' example. Be open to the possibility to change your mind! As today's Collect reminds us:

***Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of the Son's redeeming work and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life. Amen.***