

Psalm 117

Matthew 15:21-28

August 16, 2020

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

A DOGGED FAITH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Rev. Calum MacLeod is the minister of St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh, Scotland. He previously served as pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago for over sixteen years. While at Fourth Presbyterian, he went home to Scotland for an extended visit on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. Upon his return to Chicago, he shared these reflections with the congregation:

“There is a very odd thing that happens on Sunday morning on the Isle of Lewis. You see, people who live beside each other, work with each other — neighbors, friends, work colleagues — on Sunday morning at 10:00 all get into their own cars and go to different churches.

“Now they are all Presbyterian . . . but some people go to to the Church of Scotland, to the national church, and they worship at the Church of Scotland. Some people go to the same place, but there is a building beside it, and it is the Free Church of Scotland. It grew out of a schism in the Church of Scotland: the Presbyterians had a fight in 1929, and the Free Church stayed separate. Some people go to the Free Presbyterian Church, which is a schism from the Free Church of Scotland. But then some people who used to go to the Free Presbyterian Church now go to the Associated Presbyterian Church of the Free Presbyterian Church because they had an argument over one of their leading figures: a Law Lord attended a Catholic funeral mass for a colleague, and so there was a major schism in the Free Presbyterian Church. So now some people who used to go to the Free Church now go to the Free Church Continuing, which is a schism of the Free Church, which was a schism from the Church of Scotland. They are all Presbyterians. Everyone goes to their different churches. Disagreements over doctrine, over leadership, over money, over personalities all caused these various schisms over time.”¹

Who’s in and who’s out? It’s a nagging and divisive question and, sad to say, we’re very good at deciding. Of course, most of the time if not all of the time, we put ourselves on the inside, even when it comes to receiving God’s grace and mercy. As the writer Ann Lamott so bluntly and, sad to say, accurately puts it, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”

You can’t get much more inside/outside than Matthew’s story about Jesus, his disciples, and the Canaanite woman. For some unknown reason, Jesus left his stomping grounds of Nazareth and Galilee and headed northwest, into the region of Tyre and Sidon, referred to by the Jews as “paganland.” There he met the ultimate outsider (which is kind of funny to say, since he’s in her neighborhood and not vice versa). She’s not just a woman — not even just a Gentile woman — no, Matthew identifies her as a

“**Canaanite**” woman! By the way, there were no Canaanites left by the time Jesus visited the region of Tyre and Sidon. Identifying this Gentile woman as a “Canaanite” raises all sorts of red flags for Jesus and his disciples. The Canaanites were the archenemies of and greatest danger to the Israelites when they crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land. They were pagans. They were unclean. They were outsiders, even in their own land (or at least the Israelites considered them outside the reach of God’s grace and mercy).

So, how did this Canaanite woman, who lived in paganland as the ultimate outsider (supposedly!) from God’s grace and mercy, know to call Jesus “Lord, Son of David”? How did she know to ask him for mercy and healing for her daughter? Matthew doesn’t answer those questions, but how about that? The ultimate outsider — the person in the story you would least expect to know who Jesus is, much less have faith in him — is the one who “gets it right.”

To say the least, this gospel story is quite difficult to hear, especially when you consider how Jesus treats this desperate mother. First, he gives her the silent treatment. Next, he seems to write her off when he tells his disciples (but within easy earshot of the woman), “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Then, finally, and probably worst of all, Jesus appears to insult her with a common Jewish slur against the Gentiles. Granted, he doesn’t come right out and call her a dog, but it doesn’t take much imagination to hear that in his comment to the begging mother, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” (15:26)

The Jewish people in Jesus’ day didn’t keep dogs as pets. They were considered “unclean” animals because they scavenged and came into contact with dead bodies. According to one source, however, Gentiles apparently treated dogs differently. They may have kept dogs as household pets and fed them under the table. As the writer comments, “This cultural difference might explain the woman’s response . . . The Canaanite woman’s cultural context differs from Jesus’; they allow their pets to be fed while the children eat. One can feed the children and feed the pets too!”²

Pun intended, the Canaanite woman had a “dogged faith.” She was tenacious, persistent, willing to do anything for her child. She refused to be sent away, to be ignored, to slink off into the shadows like a whipped dog. As strange as it sounds to us, it has been said that she even taught Jesus something that day when he was in her neighborhood. Instead of arguing with him about calling her and her people “dogs,” she seems to say, “That may be the way it is between us, but I trust there is enough of God’s mercy and love to go around so that the dogs can be fed even while the children are eating!” Jesus marvels at her faith (my Bible has an exclamation point after his praise of her faith!) — **great** is your faith!

What’s the point? It’s interesting that the story about the Canaanite woman’s faith comes right after Jesus has taught the crowd that “it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles . . . what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.” (15:11, 18) In other words, Jesus has turned the whole concept of clean/unclean, insider/outsider on its head. It’s as if Matthew then illustrates that very teaching in the next story about the

unclean, ultimate outsider showing Jesus that what came out of her heart was great faith in God's mercy and love and in Jesus himself as someone who could and would share that mercy and love.

I started this sermon with Rev. MacLeod's honest description of his Scottish neighbors scattering to so many different Presbyterian churches on a Sunday morning. It almost sounds like "Who's on first?" The story is humorous, to an extent, but it's also very sad and very convicting, isn't it? We are quick to identify "the other" — "those people" — as being the outsiders. In our own Presbyterian Church, in the 1950's and 1960's it was African-American believers who heard disciples say, "Send them away, for they keep shouting at us." In the 1950's, 1960's, 1970's, and even beyond, it was women who felt called to the gospel ministry who heard the disciples/the "insiders" say, "Send them away, for they keep shouting at us." In the 1990's until today, it is members of the LGBTQ community of believers who seek full inclusion in the life and ministry of the church who hear the insiders say, "Send them away, for they keep shouting at us." Even in the church — and especially in the wider society today — we wield the identification of "the other/the outsider" as a weapon, and we're reluctant to pay attention to the dogged faith of "those people."

As I said, this is a hard gospel story to read, to hear, to preach on, to understand, and to take to heart. But, as Mark Twain famously said, "It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it's the parts that I do understand."

A dogged faith — a great faith. What can we learn from this Canaanite woman? If we have ears, let us listen and learn.

Let us pray: (written by George MacLeod, founder of the Iona Community in Scotland)

Lord, we are so warm in our own self-esteem that we freeze the folk around us. We get so high in our own estimation that we stand isolated on a mountaintop of self-righteousness. That is why you came, Lord Jesus: not to save the lecherous, but to turn the righteous to repentance, and that is me, O Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Calum I. Macleod, "The Trajectory of Salvation," August 17, 2008 at www.fourthchurch.org.

²Mitzi J. Smith, "Commentary on Matthew 15:[10-20] 21-28," at www.workingpreacher.org.