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“At your limit?” **Sermon on Matthew 15:21-28**

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The Gospel of Matthew is the only gospel that mentions an organization called “the church.” It is a gospel written 50 to 60 years after the resurrection - about two generations at the time. While Matthew may have written his gospel to provide a historical narrative of the life of Jesus, his aim was also to teach his congregation; he pointed his narrative to address the situation at hand in his community. His church.

He does this right from the beginning of his gospel with the genealogy of Jesus. For most folks it is just a list of names, but to Matthew’s community those names are stories. Matthew writes to Jews who have become followers of Jesus. He begins his genealogy with Abraham, and you know that’s not just a name, it’s stories upon stories. It’s a name God gave Abram! “You’ll have children as many as the stars of the sky.” We are children of Abraham.

But Matthew does something unconventional for his time; he also includes a few women. All of them were foreigners; two of them were Canaanite women. Tamar, who played as a prostitute in order to get justice, and Rahab, who was a prostitute who hid spies who climbed over the walls of Jericho. All of them come with a story that runs a bit spicy. Stories of women who saved the day.

I tell you all this because Matthew has us encountering another Canaanite woman in our scripture for this morning. It is text that pushes our understanding of who Jesus was. But remember, Matthew is writing to a Jewish congregation, who may have been at their limit as to how far the Gospel could reach.

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 from that moment.

Limits. There is a Canaanite woman who is at her limit. She's at her wits' end. Her daughter is sick. "Canaanite" means nothing to us, unless we are able to substitute Canaanite with some nationality that we'd like to see less of. Hopefully, that's a difficult task to come up with.

Far easier is to identify with her struggle. I know people in our own congregation who have flown a child to the best hospital in the world. Because when it comes to your child's health, you do your research, you spend your money without thinking, you do anything and everything you can! No limits.

This woman! No limits!

She's done her research. She knows about Jesus. She identifies him! None of this "Good teacher" stuff. None of this, "I can see you're a religious man." No! "Have mercy on me, LORD! (This foreign woman who knows him as LORD.) SON of DAVID, she's read his genealogy. "I know what line you come from! Can I call you cousin? For you have a little Canaanite in you!"

"...Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon."

"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon!" What should happen next is what always happens next: Jesus should say, "Take me to your child," and upon arrival, he would heal her. What should happen next is what always happens next: Jesus should say, "Because you spoke the truth about who I am, your daughter has been made well."

What should happen is what always happens: the child is healed.

Matthew says, "Jesus DID NOT ANSWER HER." THAT'S NOT JESUS!

It is, however, me. I have an aversion to complicated ministry. I simply don't have the time for it. For example, a few Sundays ago, Jesse, who is on our blessed youth staff, came up to me after worship and said, "Donovan, I want you to meet this woman. (I don't remember her name - we'll call her Carol.) And I smiled and shook Carol's hand, and she smiled back at me. Jesse said, "Carol has come to this church, and she has no idea why she's here." And I said, "Well, she'll fit right in." I didn't really say that....

What Jesse was trying to convey to me was that Carol was losing her memory and, for some reason unknown to Carol and to us, she ended up on our doorstep. To lose your memory is sad and so frightening. I know the call that says, "Dad took the keys, and we don't know where he is, and he doesn't know where he is." The senior alert. "Have you seen my mother? Can you help find my father?"

But there in the parlor, Jesse looked at me and said, "What do we do?"

Now you have to understand. I preached a couple of sermons. I had to talk to people. As an introvert, that's an exhausting day. And as I said, I have an aversion to complicated ministry, so I said to Jesse, "You have me confused with one of our Associate Pastors." But you'd be proud of me. I didn't immediately give up. We did have an address for her that was close to where Ashley Higgins lived, so I yelled over to Ashley to see if she might have this woman follow her to her home.

And once I handed this ministry off to my capable staff, I went off to a deserted place to pray. What I can tell you is that Carol somehow got home. What I can tell you is I didn't really have to be involved. What I can tell you is, I shouldn't be that way. But I'm that way!

But Jesus can't be that way. Jesus is better than that!

"Have Mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, for my daughter is tormented by a demon!" Jesus was silent. She was not. "Have Mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon!" Jesus was silent.

The disciples were not silent! "Jesus, send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." It is the affliction of the church! People shout at us who want something all the time! They need something! They think they should get something because we're the church. What do they take us for, the Body of Christ?

"Send her away, for she keeps shouting at us. We have our limits. We're not God!

But Jesus is...

And Jesus KEEPS HIS SILENCE to the woman. He speaks to his disciples. And the words he speaks are theological. I love a good theological answer. They are so high and lifted up. They soar without limits way up there! So high that they are of no earthly good!

A theological answer can see a hungry person and say, "As the Bible says, 'Lazy hands make for poverty, and diligent hands make for wealth.'" A theological answer can see a person stuck on the side of the road, "AS THE BIBLE SAYS, 'No harm befalls the righteous, but endless are the misfortunes of the wicked.'"

A theological answer can see a woman whose daughter is possessed by a demon and says, "AS THE WORD OF THE LORD SAYS, 'I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel.'" Jesus has set a limit. And if you're not the woman in this story, the fact that Jesus set a limit is good news, indeed! The gospel is for us, but the gospel isn't for everyone.

"We have a well-defined ministry. We are to focus on the lost sheep of Israel."

Whew! We are to deal with people who look like us, talk like us, vote like us; the only difference is they're lost. Come out! Come out! Wherever you are! Well, they know where to find us! "I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel." Good news, indeed! Now we know the parameters. We know our limits.

Unless you're the mother of a sick girl. She comes and kneels at his feet!

She won't leave him alone, not just because she's a mom. She won't leave him alone because she has a theological answer that is a good theological answer. It gives a damn about the people of the earth! It is a theology of mercy that has no limits.

Maybe she knows her scripture. Maybe she knows the story of Elijah who came over the border to the widow of Zarephath during the drought. A widow who was making a last meal for her and her son, with the last little bit of flour and oil. And who comes to the door, but a Jew and a stranger. A wanderer. And she says, "Have a seat at the table." Hospitality without limit. And we know rest of the story. The oil and flour never run out! No limits.

Maybe she knows the Prophet Isaiah: "Arise, Jerusalem! All the nations of the world will come to your light...". No limits. Maybe she knows her scripture, remembering King Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple. "Lord, when the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name—for they will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when they come and pray toward this temple, do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel..."

She knows, "Lord, have mercy!: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She knows, "God isn't into the small things! Belittling things..." "Even the dogs get the crumbs from the Master's table." And there's the truth... she knows... Jesus knows.

"Let it be done for you as you wish. Great is your faith..."

And those in Matthew's congregation who were celebrating a limited ministry suddenly have no limits. And Matthew hits it home, for this woman sets the table for what will happen in the next paragraph. Great crowds of the lame, the blind, the maimed, the mute, they will be put at his feet.

And Matthew says that Jesus healed them. And the great multitude have been following him for three days. Jesus says, "I have compassion on them for they have nothing to eat." And just as he fed for over 5,000 hungry Jews, Jesus looked up to heaven, broke the bread and gave it to his disciples, and they had over a dozen basketfuls. This time, he does the same thing. It sounds like communion, but this time it's 4,000 gentiles, with seven baskets leftover. There's plenty. Stuff yourselves!

We are human. We have our limits. A time to be born and a time to die. We are limited souls. What happens in between is life. And you can fill it with the crap the world is teaching us - to get smaller and smaller and smaller - speak to only those who speak like us, look like us, vote like us – no! Break out of those limits!

We have a call! Taste and see that the Lord is good! During this school year, we're going to focus on how we might break out of the boundaries that keep us safe. Put the discipline back into disciples! I'm asking you to get more deeply involved in a faith that has no limits. The world demands more. Enough of the crumbs. We have a banquet.

Taste and see that the Lord is good!