

# Let Your Voice Be Heard

## The Story of the Canaanite Woman

Matthew 15:21-28  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Did you find this gospel reading from Matthew 15 disturbing? I hope so, it disturbs me. Let's face it, Matthew's story of Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman is one that's hard for many of us to hear. **Jesus is portrayed as responding in an uncompassionate, even exclusionary way** to the cry for help from this Gentile woman on behalf of her daughter who is being tormented by a demon. **This is not the compassionate Jesus we teach here in worship or in Church School.**

We read that Jesus' initial response is to intentionally ignore this unnamed, foreign woman from a different faith tradition. The disciples' response is similar to when they faced that hungry crowd of thousands, "send her away." Not a flattering portrayal of discipleship.

When the pleading woman persists, we are given the impression that Jesus reacts unwillingly and only under compulsion. His words strike us as unduly harsh and insensitive. **"It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs"** (v. 26). The context of this saying certainly suggests that the people whom Jesus is called to minister to, the "lost sheep of Israel" (the Jews), are "children," and that the Gentiles, represented by this bold woman, are, by contrast, nothing more than "dogs." **Such a statement implies that non-Jews are outside of Jesus' mission and ministry, thus are to be seen as almost as subhuman and undeserving of the God of Israel's concern.** From an historical perspective, this was indeed an ongoing issue in the very early Christian Church. They were initially faced with whether or not non-Jews/Gentiles should be included in their community of faith.

Is that really the message Matthew was trying to get across, written some 50 years or so after Jesus' death? Several biblical commentators make various attempts to relieve this story of its obvious embarrassment concerning the nature and character of Jesus, thus God. Jesus was just testing her faith before he helped her, say some; others suggest Jesus was struggling in his own mind with the idea of a mission to non-Jews; Jesus was bringing her to an appropriate humility, say yet others. But all of these together do not smooth out the surprisingly harsh tones of this encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman.

Canaanites, you may recall, were the ancient indigenous population before the Israelites arrived and sought to exterminate them from the land. I'm among those who do not believe God was or is the author of genocide, but that's another sermon.

This is one of those stories that must be handled with care, therefore not read more into the story than is there. That is why it is important is to take a good close look at this **Canaanite woman**, for she has a lot to teach us – especially about letting her voice be heard and *insisting* on being included. She becomes **a role model for others who must continue to insist on being heard and included.** We can learn from her clever wit,

boldness, persistence, courage, faith, and refusal to take “no” for an answer. New Testament scholar, Sharon Ringe points out in the book, *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, that **the woman did not accept the low esteem in which the society held both her daughter and herself. Our society today continues to try to force certain others into a similar position of low esteem, of second-class citizenship.**

**A crucial element of our mission and ministry here at College Hill is to speak out against such dehumanizing efforts, as well as to help all people realize they are beloved children of God.** This story, then, serves to challenge the sexism and racism of the readers, ancient and modern, who tend to consider those of different gender, ethnic origin, faith tradition, or whatever, as “the other.” When will we all realize and affirm that most often, **being different is just different**, without adding any moral judgement, let alone exclusion or condemnation.

The gospels ultimately teach us that **no one is inherently more distant from or of less concern to God than any other person or group of persons. There are a lot of Christians today who still need to learn this lesson**, that God doesn't favor Christians more than any other of God's children, nor this nation more than all others, for that matter. Yet again, that's another sermon.

Saying that, sometimes we also need to remind ourselves of all this as well, especially when we fall into that same trap and temptation to “other” those not like ourselves. This story invites us, then, to struggle with our own perceptions of whom you and I consider to be “the others”, those we think are less deserving of God's grace, forgiveness, and inclusion. In other words, those we don't want to include. For are there not some people who we just as soon not want to sit with us at the same table?

Let's again remember this story also invites us to **put ourselves in the role of the Canaanite woman – the role of “the other” – to measure how we speak up and reach out in courage, persistence, and confidence in our insistence on being heard and included.** Though most of us can be considered to be in positions of privilege, many of us have also experienced what it feels like to be considered an outsider, or second-class, from the mainstream or those in power, being labeled as an “other”. **Thank goodness for allies and those who spoke out on our behalf when we couldn't ourselves.**

Here's a recent example of letting our voice be heard. I am among a group of clergy and religious leaders here in Tulsa who have signed onto a letter, published on Friday in the Tulsa World, advocating for Tulsa Public Schools to be managed locally, not by our state government. The closing sentence reads, “We urge the State Department of Education and the State Superintendent to build bridges instead of hurling rocks as we all seek to forge a better system for our kids.” Thankfully, Mayor Bynum also let his voice be heard on the attempt of a state takeover by responding, in part, “We do not want it, and we do not need it.” He boldly added, it is “an affront to democratic principles of self-government upon which our country was founded.” Thank you, Mayor Bynum.

As I mentioned in a sermon just a couple of weeks ago, in reference to Jesus having compassion for that hungry crowd of thousands, the third bullet point in our **College Hill Mission Statement** is, “**Reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice.**” That means taking action. That's something this community of faith is known for, not only within Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, but within this city as well. **The list is long on issues we have taken a public stand on advocating and promoting, such as LGBTQ+ rights, gun violence prevention, anti-racism, advocating for immigrants and refugees, and inclusion, in general, among others.**

We also let our voice be heard when implementing the first bullet point of our Mission Statement, to “**build an inclusive community of faith.**” And that includes living out the second bullet point, “**receive and openly share the love of God.**” By the way, if you need a reminder of our Mission Statement, it’s printed almost every week in our bulletin announcement insert. **It speaks strongly about our identity – who we are, and what we hope to accomplish, with God’s help.**

But letting our voice be heard obviously goes beyond a public church stance, or the stance of the pastor. Many of you have also been bold, courageous, and persistent in your own work and life in letting your voice be heard. And yes, sometimes that can be, and has been, risky. Also, it can never be stated strongly enough that you let your voice be heard every time you vote.

So, in returning to our biblical story, the un-named, foreign, pagan woman was undoubtedly an outsider on almost every level. This story informs us, however, that the good news of God’s mercy, generosity, and acceptance crosses all barriers and boundaries, and is therefore extended to those we would label “outsiders” as well. I really like the approach taken by Jill Duffield, former editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, when she asks, “What would the Canaanite woman do?” She adds:

I need to call upon her tenacity and persistence, her humility and strength, her stalwart commitment to seek help on behalf of those unable to seek it out for themselves. I need to remember her unwillingness to be dismissed... The Canaanite woman will not slink away in shame or be silenced until her daughter is healed... Access to a seat at the table may still be denied, but those on the margins and those standing with them, will not turn back until we are seen and heard... **We could use a whole culture full of Canaanite women who refuse to be left unseen, unheard, who refuse to be dismissed.**

I will leave you to ponder the following questions this week:

- How often and on what occasions has your, has our, silence led to regret?
- What silences need to be broken?
- Will you, will we, refuse to be silenced, especially when lives are at stake?
- What do we as the church need to say?
- **Do you, do we, have the courage, perseverance, faith, and even the boldness to insist on those things that lead to an abundant life of well-being, fulfillment, and full inclusion – for ourselves, the marginalized, and all others?**

Don’t be silent. Take action. Let your voice be heard.

Amen.

Resources:

Jill Duffield, “11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost”, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Aug. 10, 2020.