

Perplexing Texts: The Canaanite Woman

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Peter Jonker

Matthew 15:21-28

Here is our third perplexing text, one also suggested by more than one of you. What's perplexing about it? Well, listen to the things Jesus says.

So do you see why this text perplexes people? Jesus says and does some things that are very un-Jesus like in this passage. He seems to ignore a woman in desperate need, and then he compares her to a dog. Jesus' words definitely get our attention. And we will give them attention in due time, but before we do that let's acknowledge that Jesus' harsh words are not the main focus of this passage. This passage isn't meant to point toward Jesus' strange words, this passage is meant to point toward the faith of the woman. Matthew records Jesus' strange words when he tells this story, but he wants you to see the remarkable faith of this Canaanite woman. In fact, it's not just Matthew pointing in that direction, it's Jesus. He says, 'Woman you have great faith.' Jesus holds her up to his disciples and to us as an example.

She's an unlikely example. She's a Gentile, and furthermore she's a Gentile from a particularly hated tribe, the Canaanites. And yet she turns out to have a faith that the disciples could learn from, she turns out to have a faith that we could learn from. What is impressive about her faith is the way it keeps going through obstacles. Her faith is fierce. In this passage, her faith endures at least 4 significant obstacles she endures. Let's look at those obstacles one by one, because we face the same obstacles as we walk the road of faith.

The first obstacle is her circumstances. This woman is in a terrible place. Her daughter is possessed by a demon. Evil has invaded the most precious part of her world. She feels the way every parent feels when their child, their innocent child, is suffering in a way that makes no sense. When your child has a learning disability that destroys their confidence. When your son falls into addiction. When the black cloud of depression engulfs your beautiful teenage granddaughter. You don't feel like the powers of heaven are smiling on you. You're more likely to feel like God is against you. It's not fertile ground for faith. It's the kind of thing that make people walk away. But this woman doesn't turn her face away. She pursues Jesus. She cries out to him again and again. She throws herself at Jesus' feet. Lord where else can we go? You have the words of eternal life.

So she pursues Jesus, and when she finds him, she meets the second obstacle to her faith, the silence of God. "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly!" she cries in a loud voice. "But Jesus did not answer a word." This is a perplexing moment. Jesus seems to ignore the cry of a truly desperate woman.

As perplexing as that moment is, it also fits our experience of how we sometimes feel when we cry out to heaven. There are many who know what it's

like to throw up desperate prayers and to have the feeling like Jesus does not answer a word. Someone in the congregation becomes critically ill, a younger person, and you say, “Lord have mercy on us! We need this person. Please heal her. Her family needs her, the church needs her! She could do so much good if you spared her!! And think of the witness it would be to the community if you worked a miracle and rescued her! Think of all her unbelieving neighbors and friends who could hear her testimony and who might glorify your name!” But despite these heartfelt prayers, the person fades and dies. We end up feeling like Job: “I cry out to you O God, but you do not answer; I stand up, but you merely look at me!” (Job 30:20)

Many people’s faith withers in the silence. Karen Armstrong, a religion scholar talks about what silence did to her faith. She was a nun who gave her life to finding God and communicating with him. But somehow in all her searching and study and in all her devotion and worship, she never felt like she heard back from God. It was as if God had said not a word. “I wrestled with myself in prayer, trying to force myself to encounter God, but he remained tantalizingly absent. Eventually I felt my belief in God slip quietly away. He had never really impinged upon my life.” We know that the voice of God is sometimes hard to hear. He is not always obvious. What do you do in the silence? Karen Armstrong walks away. But not this Canaanite woman. She keeps moving toward the Lord. Her faith persists through the silence. She keeps calling out in the dark.

Which brings us to the third barrier to faith: The church. The disciples say to Jesus, “Jesus that woman is so annoying. We’re sick and tired of her yelling! Get rid of her Lord!!” The congregation members don’t want her around. They don’t want to deal with her problems. The disciples dismiss this woman partly out of impatience, but also out of prejudice. The Jews didn’t like Gentiles in general, and they didn’t like Canaanites in particular. That dislike goes way back. In Deuteronomy 7 when they enter the promised land, God tells them to get rid of all the Canaanites from the land! Do not mix with them! Don’t have them as part of your group. Do you know the last verse of the book of Zechariah? Go look it up. Zechariah finishes his book with a vision of Israel restored. “Every pot in Jerusalem will be Holy to the Lord God Almighty, and in that day there will no longer be a Canaanite in the house of the Lord God almighty.” This pesky woman starts making all this noise disturbing their busy lives, and that’s bad enough, but when they realize she’s a Canaanite, it’s, “Lord send her away!”

Sometimes the behavior of church people is the biggest obstacle to people’s faith. Sometimes our young people look at the things that are said and done in Jesus’ name and they walk away. Sometimes our unbelieving neighbors look at the things we do, they see the way we cling to our stuff and our power, they see the very public failings of Christian preachers and leaders, and they think, ‘if that’s what Jesus is about, I’m not interested.’ I’m sure all of us could tell stories about church people who have hurt us. The failings and hypocrisy of the church are a huge barrier to belief. So in addition to the initial silence of

Jesus, this woman gets the nastiness of the disciples. But this woman doesn't have her eyes on the disciples. This woman is focused on Jesus. Jesus is the center of her hope, not these 12 men. So she keeps going. She persists.

Which brings the final obstacle. The words of Jesus. "I was sent only for the lost sheep of Israel!" "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." These are perplexing words. They seem so unlike Jesus. They seem to push her away.

I can offer some qualifiers to what Jesus says. Yes, Jesus calls the woman a dog, and that really jolts our ears, but in Jesus time it was common for Jews to call gentiles 'dogs.' Jesus reflects common usage. And when Jesus says "I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel," he's simply speaking the truth about his mission. He knows that the gospel is ultimately for the Gentiles too, but this mission is not to go to Rome or Greece. That's for later. He wants to light up the world with the gospel, but that mission starts with the lost sheep of Israel. The fire of the gospel will eventually burn all over the earth, but he lights the fire by first blowing on the glowing ember of Israel.

That helps qualify Jesus words some, but they still sting. Even if it was normal for Jews to call Gentiles dogs, it still sounds perplexing when it comes out of Jesus' mouth. Commentators reach for all sorts of explanations here. Some people say that Jesus was testing the woman. He doesn't really mean what he says here; he's just testing her faith. That might be right. But to me that raises new questions. Other people say that Jesus is undergoing a learning process in this passage. The father is using this woman to grow his understanding of his mission. Talking about Jesus learning might sound strange, but it's at least possible. Jesus learned things while he was on earth. Luke 2 tells us that as he aged, Jesus grew in wisdom and stature; he learned. Hebrews 5:8 says that Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered. But ultimately whatever explanation you choose involves a good deal of guessing, because the passage simply doesn't tell you what Jesus was thinking when he spoke these words. The only thing we can know for sure about these words is that they were a barrier. They were an obstacle between her and the mercy she was asking for.

That still happens sometimes. Sometimes God's words, the Bible's words, can seem like a barrier to faith. I'm not questioning the Bible's authority when I say that, I'm simply speaking an honest truth of experience. There are things that we read in the Bible that stop us in our tracks. Read Psalm 137:9 and what it says there about Babylonian babies. Read 1 Samuel 15 and see what the Lord asks Saul to do to the Amalekites. I read texts like these, and I sometimes find myself saying, "Lord I love you and trust you, but I don't understand this. I don't understand what you are doing here." And If I say that, you can imagine what unbelievers say when they read them. Sometimes Biblical words that would normally be fine and good suddenly become a barrier. Psalm 91 has always been one of your favorite Psalms, but then you lose your wife in a car accident. A drunk driver kills her on her way home from work. And a month later you read Psalm 91:9-10 again, If you say, "The Lord is my refuge," and

make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you; no disaster will come near your tent.” It leaves you cold.

This woman comes to Jesus in her need. Jesus says these strange things that she doesn't understand. But her misunderstanding isn't enough to stop her. She throws herself down in front of Jesus and says: 'Lord have mercy on me! I know my life isn't much, I may be a dog, but I'm a hungry dog and I will be satisfied with the crumbs that fall from the master's table. This woman's faith stands up to all the obstacles. Jesus says to her, "Woman! You have great faith!"

All of us here are working on our faith. We're all trying to hold on and be strong and get through the obstacles. Some of us are doing pretty well. Our faith is strong. We feel close to God and we can sing praise and offer up prayers with real gladness in our hearts. And that's great. Blessed are all those here with strong faith. The church would be lost without people like you. But some of us are struggling. I know that some of you are finding it really, really hard to hold on to God. Because of what feels like God's silence, because of the behavior of the church, because of circumstances that have rocked your world. Faith used to be so easy for you. You used to hold faith in your hand like a gift, it was comfortable and beautiful. But now, your faith is like a rope hanging over a chasm of questions. And you're holding onto that rope with all your might, but it's burning your hands and you feel like you're slipping. I want to say to you don't give up, keep holding on. I want to say hang in there. Jesus shows you the faith of this woman to say, hold on, don't give up. I am still here. I will get you through this. I have a plan.

I also want to show you one more thing. I want to finish this sermon not by showing you something this woman did, I want to point you to something Jesus did, something which will give context to his perplexing words. Something which might be a ground for your faith. Jesus says this strange, hard thing to the woman, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." To which the woman replies, "Yes Lord, but even the dogs can eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." But look what happens right after our story. Jesus goes to the Gentile part of Galilee. Galilee of the Gentiles. Great crowds of Gentiles swarm to him. 4000 men besides women and children come to him crying out for mercy. He gives them mercy. He heals their diseases and makes the lame walk and makes the blind see. Matthew tells us that these Gentiles give praise to the God of Israel. When the crowd gets hungry, he invites them all to the master's table. He takes seven loaves of bread and after he gave thanks for them, he breaks them and his disciples distribute them to the crowd. Everyone is fed. The bread abounds and there are 7 baskets of crumbs that fall from the master's table. These Gentiles don't just sit under the table like dogs. They are at the table like children. And they don't get the crumbs, they get a feast. Yes, Jesus says some perplexing things to this woman, but it turns out this miracle is the beginning of a larger story in which God shows his plan to bring all the outsiders to his table. God will invite all the dirty dogs-including me and including you-to his table, and he will make them his children and he will give them a feast. © Rev. Peter Jonker