

## What's in a Name? The Canaanite Woman

June 27, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

### Matthew 15:21-28

Have you ever run across a passage of scripture that really *bothers* you? That doesn't sit well? That gets under your skin?

I think that probably just about anybody who has spent serious time reading and studying scripture has come across a few of these passages. These are the ones that I like to call "when I get to heaven" scriptures – as in, "when I get to heaven I am going to ask God what was up with that, because I just can't wrap my mind around it – and I might never be able to."

Passages like in the book of Joshua, when the Israelite armies are told to completely annihilate all the Canaanite people – men, women, children, even the animals. We can theologize and rationalize that passage all day long, but I don't think I am ever going to like it. And before you say, "oh, that's just the Old Testament," well...the New Testament has them too. And today's passage from the gospel of Matthew is one of them.

So, I'm putting this disclaimer out here at the very beginning. I struggle with this scripture. A lot. However, one thing that I have learned over the years is that rarely does any good come out of simply ignoring the passages that make us squirm. I had a yoga teacher once who said something that I have never forgotten. She put us all in a really uncomfortable pose – for all of you yogis out there, I think it was some variation on lizard pose. And she kept us there. For a loooong time. And just about the time we were all getting ready to throw something at her, she said "remember that growth and comfort don't know each other." In other words, sometimes we *have to* sit with and walk through discomfort if we are going to grow.

The Apostle Paul said it well when he said "I rejoice in my sufferings. Because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

So I am not pretending that reading the story of the Canaanite woman amounts to any kind of suffering. It doesn't. But if you, like me, struggle with this passage, then you are in luck. Because rather than running away from it, we are going to engage with it. And maybe, in the struggle, we will discover a tiny little measure of growth.

So, the story of the Canaanite woman comes as part of the series that we are journeying through this summer on unnamed heroes in scripture. People who have found themselves cast to the margins of society for one reason or another, and as a result the writers of scripture didn't even think enough of these people to tell us their names.

We started with God himself – the God who chose to remain nameless. Then we explored the obscure little story of the Medium at Endor – an illegal “ghost hunter” during the reign of King Saul. Then last week we heard the story of Jephthah’s daughter – a deeply-faithful woman who happened to have a deeply-cowardly father. A woman who showed her faith by taking life’s punches as they came and trusting, when all evidence pointed to the contrary, that she would be okay.

And today we have a woman who is also deeply-faithful. But in contrast to Jephthah’s daughter, the Canaanite woman *doesn’t* just “take life’s punches.” She is *not* going to go quietly, and she is going to make a scene when necessary. She refuses to take no for an answer, and she even calls Jesus himself to task.

Jephthah’s daughter was strong because she was able to maintain peace even when faced with death. That is incredibly hard to do.

The Canaanite woman is strong because she is unafraid to stand up, even to *God*. She’s not valued enough by society for us to even know her name, but she doesn’t let that stop her. She is a force of nature.

So, let’s get to her story.

To really get to understand what’s going on here, we need to know a little bit about the geography of Ancient Palestine, and the culture of the people living there.

There are basically four major regions at play here, and as we see in scripture, they are *very* distinct from one another.

- First, we have Judea. Judea is the area that probably first jumps into our minds when we think of the Jewish people in the New Testament times. And even in the Old Testament times. This was the region of ancient Judah. The capital city was Jerusalem, which housed the Temple. Judea was basically the seat of Judaism – the most Jewish of Jewish areas. The home of the Pharisees and most important religious leaders. Judea was to Judaism what, say, Lancaster County is to the Amish.
- Now, North of Judea is what was in ancient times the former Northern Kingdom of Israel, that got conquered by the Assyrians. And this area is actually divided into several different regions. The three that we are going to talk about today are Samaria, Galilee, and Phoenicia.
  - Directly to the north of Judea was Samaria. Samaria was like, the hated rival team to Judea. We think the Samaritans were former Israelites who had intermarried with the Assyrians when they invaded. So, they were sort-of Jewish, and sort-of not. They carried with them a lot of Jewish customs and traditions; sometimes they even worshipped the God of Israel, but not always. In the New Testament, the Israelites loved to hate the Samaritans, and if they had to travel north of Judea for any reason,

they would generally do everything they could to take the long way around so that they wouldn't have to pass through Samaria. Legally, Judeans were forbidden from doing business with, or even *talking to* Samaritans. That's why it was such a big deal in Luke's gospel when the disciples see Jesus carrying on a long, in-depth conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well. You just didn't *do* that.

- Then directly to the north of Samaria was another *very* Jewish region known as Galilee. A lot of the gospels take place in Galilee – if for no other reason than that this was where Jesus was from. Galilee was home to Nazareth – Jesus' hometown, as well as the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus and his disciples spent so much time.
  - Galilee was like, Judea's annoying younger sibling. Judea was the firstborn who tried to do everything perfectly and get everything just right. The perfectionist of the Israelite family. Galilee was definitely from the same family, but was a lot more loosey-goosey about rules and traditions.
  - Galilee was far wealthier than their Judean cousins to the south. It was a better area for fishing, and agriculture. They were more swayed by Greek influence than Judea, and they spoke Aramaic, which was kind-of like a Hebrew dialect that the people from Judah made fun of to no end. Kind-of like someone from New York making fun of someone with a Texas drawl. They both speak English, but it is not the same English.
  - And most importantly, people from Judea believed that people from Galilee were far too lax in their religious observance.
- And then finally, just to the west of Galilee, we have the region of Phoenicia. Basically, modern-day Lebanon. This area is right on the Mediterranean coast, with the two major coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon, and it is thought to be made up of the Canaanites that survived Israelite invasions from the time of Joshua onward. It was almost entirely a Gentile area. Throughout history, Phoenicia and Israel were relatively friendly with one another (not like Samaria and Judea) – but there were a few problems that arose now and then. Like in the book of 1 Kings, the evil queen Jezebel who married King Ahab and who put a price on the prophet Elijah's head – Jezebel was from Phoenicia.
  - It is important to note, that even though the Phoenicians and the Israelites were *relatively* friendly neighbors, and they did hold some trade partnerships, etc., there were still some Jewish laws that held that spending time in close proximity with a foreigner would defile a person. Make them unclean. And so, Jewish people from Galilee and especially the super-conservative Jewish people from Judea would not spend much time in Phoenicia, and would only go there if they absolutely had to.

So in today's scripture reading, Jesus and his disciples have travelled from their home in Galilee to the region of Tyre and Sidon, in Phoenicia. So, they are in gentile territory, and in this area *they* are the outsiders. Why they are there, we have no idea. But we do get the sense that they know they don't belong there, and they are probably pretty uncomfortable.

At any rate, we get the feeling that Jesus is in a really big hurry. Probably in a hurry to get his necessary business done, and then to get home, as soon as possible. Because Galileans just simply did not linger in Phoenicia any longer than they had to. And Jesus was no exception.

But then something happens that slows everything down. A woman comes out of nowhere and starts yelling and hollering at Jesus, making a huge raucous and causing quite a commotion. Where Jesus had probably just wanted to fly under the radar until he got home, he can't do that anymore because this woman won't let him.

We know almost nothing about her, except that she is a Canaanite. So, one of the descendants of the people who centuries before God had told Joshua to wipe off the face of the planet. If Joshua had followed God's orders, this woman wouldn't even exist. It seems like there is something going on between God and the Canaanites that I just simply do not understand, and may never understand.

And that even carries over to Jesus, because Jesus gives her the cold shoulder. Probably the only person in any of the gospels who sincerely calls out to Jesus for help, only to get snubbed. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," Jesus tells her. Basically, "not my people, not my problem."

Yikes. It sounds like Jesus *really* wants to get out of dodge here. He sounds *incredibly* uncomfortable, and uncharacteristically irritable. And we have no idea why.

But the woman doesn't give up. She won't take no for an answer. So while Jesus is trying to high-tail it out of there, she rushes in, steps in to his path to keep him from moving and kneels before him, pleading with him to please, please, please, I beg of you, just heal my daughter, who is tormented by a demon."

And Jesus' next words are even more biting. This is why I don't like this story. "It is not fair to take the children's bread and feed it to the dogs."

So, setting aside the fact that Jesus just called this desperate mother a dog, it's almost as if he is saying "there is not enough of me to go around." "The love and the care and the grace of God is not for you." "Go away. You are annoying me."

Which is not what we think of, when we think of Jesus.

But still, this woman was relentless. She would not back down.

“Yes. You are right. It would not be fair to take something from someone who should have it, and then give it to me instead. But that’s not what I’m asking. I’m not asking for a seat at the table. I’m not asking to be an honored guest. I am simply asking for the crumbs that fall from the table, that which nobody else wants or even notices. Because I know that even something as small as a tiny crumb of God’s grace will be more than enough to heal my daughter.”

Boom. Now, she has Jesus’s attention.

Here is a woman who has been on the outside looking in her whole life. A woman who, by all measures, probably shouldn’t even exist. By Jewish standards, she is an outsider – and not just any outsider. One whose entire race was supposed to have been annihilated centuries ago. By human standards at the time, as a woman, she is nothing more than property. Jesus has just told her what society – the whole world – has been telling her her entire life: That she was less than a dog. “You don’t matter. Your daughter doesn’t matter. You are not worth my time. Get out of my way.”

But even though these are the messages that she has received her whole life, she *knows* at her core that they are not true. She, probably more than the most faithful of all Israelites – more even than the religious leaders who have given their whole lives over to the service of God – this nobody, this no-name, this shouldn’t-even-be-alive woman *knows* that despite what lies society has put into her head, despite what even Jesus himself is saying to her, she is worth something to God. And she has enough faith to believe that even the smallest crumb of God’s grace is more than enough to live by.

My friends, what lies does the world tell us about ourselves, that we believe? What messages have we gotten over the years, that tell us that we are something *other than* who God says we are? Lies like, “You have to be rich to be successful,” or “you have to be skinny to be beautiful,” or “only those who are educated are really wise.” Lies like, “I am not worth spending time around,” or “I have failed as a parent, or as a spouse, or as a son or daughter,” or – the biggest lie of all – “I am unlovable. Not even God could love me. I don’t matter. I am a burden. I shouldn’t even exist.”

These echoes are so hard to get out of our heads. Once we begin to believe them, they somehow squirm down into the deepest parts of our souls and poison us from the inside-out. But here’s the truth: Even the smallest crumb of God’s grace is enough to break through these lies and reawaken us to the truth of who God has created us to be. It doesn’t matter who we are, what we have done, where we have been, what we believe about ourselves, how messed up life has gotten, how un-seen or un-known or un-loved we feel at the moment. Because no matter what anybody says, God’s grace is for us, too. And God’s grace is powerful enough to give us the strength to weather any storm that comes our way.