

A Gentile Woman's Great Faith

Sunday School Lesson

Matthew 15:21-28

April 21, 2024

In the fifteenth chapter of Matthew, Matthew is carefully telling a story that contrasts those who are acceptable to speak to Jesus, religious leaders, and their concerns versus someone unacceptable to speak directly to Jesus, a Canaanite woman, and her concerns. If you separate the stories, you may miss the point so let's look at Matthew 15:1-9 before we tackle the issue of the Canaanite woman.

Religious leaders have approached Jesus with a question - *Why are your disciples breaking the elders' rules handed down to us? They don't ritually purify their hands by washing before they eat.*" (Matthew 15:2)

If I had a chance to ask Jesus a question, this would not be it. It was socially accepted for these men to approach Jesus. It was appropriate for them to ask the Teacher a question but look what they asked! "Your disciples did not wash their hands before they ate!" These leaders were looking at external factors. Jesus replied to them that we are not tainted by what we eat or drink. It is what lies inside us that comes out and makes us unacceptable to God. If we have hatred in our hearts, that will spill out in what we say or do. What we eat did not put that hatred there. There were obviously other factors and the religious leaders seemed unconcerned about those matters. Jesus wanted his disciples to understand the difference.

Let us pray

O Holy God and Creator of the Universe, thank you for being present with us this week. Open our hearts to hear your word so we may be faithful disciples who are known by our love for one another and for our neighbors. Amen.

Our Purpose Statement: To affirm that great faith can be shown by worshipful struggle with God.

Read Matthew 15:21-28

After Jesus addresses the religious leaders, he is approached by someone who, according to custom, should not be approaching Jesus. Why? First, she was a woman. We know from the story of the woman at the well that it was inappropriate for a non-Jewish woman to approach a man, much less Jesus. This woman was also a Canaanite, people unacceptable to the Jews. They were former enemies and considered unclean. That does not deter her.

She marches right up to Jesus and starts shouting. This had to be a huge distraction and yet Jesus ignored her. The scene was getting out of hand so the disciples urged Jesus to say something to send her away. The passage does not tell us if Jesus addresses her or the crowds following him but he does make it clear that he is here for

the descendants of Abraham which basically means, not her! She stops her shouting and comes closer, falling to her knees before Jesus, crying for help.

Here Jesus says something that seems pretty harsh to those of us reading this in 2024. He tells her it is wrong to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. She quips right back at him that dogs often survive from the scraps that fall from the Master's table. What a brilliant comeback. Would you have had the courage to give that response in a crowd that clearly does not want you there?

Here she is, a despised Canaanite, a woman, and a mother with a demon possessed daughter determined to talk to Jesus. Let's add to this that in most circles of the day, having a daughter that was demon possessed would be another harsh judgment on the parents. This woman's courage and her faith inspired Jesus. He declared her daughter to be healed and she was even though she was not present for this encounter, she received healing. Where is the world did this woman acquire her faith?

"Prevenient" is a uniquely Methodist word. Unlike the Calvinists, we do not believe in total depravity and election. That means that God did not decide for us who would be saved and who would not be. We believe in universal atonement which means God desires to be reconciled to every single last one of us but we do have a choice in the matter. However, God does do quite a bit of wooing and coaxing. We believe that God is at work in our lives before we even know God. Methodists call this prevenient grace – the grace that goes before. One of the reasons we baptize infants is that we believe that God is already at work in that child's life. We, as a congregation are accepting the responsibility to teach that child about God so they will be able at some point to see God at work in their own life.

You could look at this woman and say God's prevenient grace was at work in her even though she was not a descendent of Abraham. Maybe she heard the stories. Maybe she had witnessed Jesus heal or heard him speak. We cannot tell you how she knew but she knew and her faith was not in vain. Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 in other clashes with religious – *I require mercy, not sacrifice*. While it is not in the story directly, it is there indirectly. She required mercy and Jesus gave her what she needed.

Yes, this is one of those passages that makes us uncomfortable but I do believe that looking at these verses as a part of the greater story in Chapter Fifteen makes so much sense. Most of the Gospel writers were very careful in how they laid out the stories for the audience. We were not their audience. Their congregations were their audience. They had no idea we would be reading them two thousand years later.

Let us pray:

O Holy God, may you be glorified in my life. May we glorify you in our church through all its ministries. Teach us to walk as children of light even when we face darkness. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.