

**LITTLE PEOPLE OF THE BIBLE: A LITTLE UNNAMED CANAANITE WOMAN WHO WOULDN'T  
TAKE 'NO' FOR AN ANSWER -- NOT EVEN FROM THE LORD**

Matthew 15:21-28

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**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

For the first time in his ministry Jesus leaves Jewish territory and enters the Gentile district of Tyre and Sidon. The transition from the Holy Land to the district of Tyre and Sidon is unimaginably greater than the one between the United States and Canada or Mexico. It's more like leaving the USA and entering Baghdad. Canaanites lived in Tyre and Sidon. Canaanites were an accursed race formerly inhabiting Palestine. God had commanded the Old Testament Israelites to wage holy war against Canaanites. Canaanites had once practiced the abomination of child sacrifice. Archaeologists have unearthed cemeteries containing thousands of sacrificed Canaanite children. Jesus went to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

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As Jesus crosses into the unholy district a Canaanite woman approaches him *shouting*. She's not politely whispering, "Psst! Can you help me?" She's *shouting* like a soccer mom when a flagrant foul levels her daughter. In the minds of the apostles she fits a racial stereotype. "Here comes one of those brassy, loud mouthed Canaanite women."

The woman shouts for mercy. Her ancestors sacrificed children, but she cries out for mercy for her demonized daughter. Κυριε ελεησον, "Lord, have mercy." *Kyrie eleison* has made its way into Christian worship. It appears in translation in one variation of our Presbyterian liturgy following the confession of sin. We confess our sins and then, in words borrowed from a Canaanite woman, we say, "Lord, have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord, have mercy."

So what does Jesus do in response to her shout for mercy? He gives her the silent treatment. He walks down the road pretending he just doesn't hear. Ever been in a situation like

that? A street beggar approaches and we pretend we don't hear. Maybe Jesus hopes if he keeps his eyes straight ahead and ignores her she'll go away. But she doesn't go away so his disciples urge Jesus to get aggressive. "Don't just ignore her! Send her away!"

But Jesus *doesn't* send her away. Instead he says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, "Canaanites aren't God's sheep. They're not objects of God's mercy." Jesus *seems* to draw a line excluding Canaanites, but the woman steps over the line. She gets "in his face." She persists with *dogged* determination. Have you ever visited a home where the owner's friendly dog jumps in your lap and licks your face and hands? The master commands the dog to get down but the dog doesn't obey. You politely push the dog away. You try to ignore the dog but the dog won't go away.

Like a puppy dog sitting at our feet begging, the Canaanite woman kneels before Jesus doggedly begging, "Lord, help me." At this point Jesus says something that appears to be incredibly rude. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jews looked upon Gentiles as dirty dogs, but what Jesus attitude is entirely different and what he says is entirely out of character. Some Biblical scholars soften his rude words. The word Jesus use for "dog" is a diminutive word. He's not referring to curs roaming streets, scavenging for food, but to a little beloved puppy dog that sits under the table waiting for scraps to fall.

Other scholars see something more profound. They see a change taking place in Jesus as he crosses religious and cultural boundaries. Jesus was both fully human as well as fully God. As a human he grew in wisdom and knowledge and understanding. Confronted by the doggedness of a Canaanite woman's faith he sees her as one of God's sheep. Jesus expanded his vision of his mission to include the whole world. If Jesus changed his attitudes towards those

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one excluded, maybe we also ~~can envision change taking place in our own~~ attitudes towards excluded people.

However we interpret Christ's words, the woman refused to be intimidated. She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." In other words, "I agree you were sent *first* to the house of Israel. I understand that we may not be your first priority. But I also believe that you've more than enough to feed us all. If I'm a dog, you have more than enough to feed me with the crumbs that fall from your table."

Here's an amazing thing. In all the gospel stories, this is the only time *anyone* got the best of Jesus in a repartee. Jesus suddenly realizes this audacious, brassy, loudmouth Canaanite woman is right. I see him throw back his head and laugh, "Touché! You got me! Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!" And in that instant, her daughter was healed.

We owe the Canaanite woman a great deal because we're the gentiles excluded from God's mercy until she challenged Jesus. We're invited to the table, not just for the crumbs but for the full feast of God's love.

I want to draw several lessons from the story of this little Canaanite woman.

First, Jesus went outside the recognized boundaries of his day. He was called primarily to the lost sheep of the house of Israel – but worked outside the boundaries. Christ wants our church to be a community of faith that defies boundaries of race, social class, life style, culture, and gender, united by our fervent belief in Christ.

Secondly, Christ wants us all to look for signs of faith in people outside the church. Jesus often said to his disciples, "O ye of little faith" while finding *great* faith in people outside the bounds of organized religion. True believers are found not only in church but also among Canaanite women, Harley Davidson owners, drug addicts, immigrants and all the other people

we tend to label as accursed, godless, and abominable. With the eyes of Christ we see faith in unexpected places.

Third, the Canaanite woman teaches us the nature of great faith. Often we talk about faith as submission to God's will. Some realities we can neither change nor control. We just have to have faith, accept, and acquiescence. But the Canaanite woman shows us a neglected aspect of faith. *Her* faith challenges God! Her faith boldly believes God for healing! She is no stereotypically passive woman accepting her accursed lot in life. She demands more. She's aggressive, bold and brassy. Her faith refuses to take "No" for an answer. She encourages us to pray boldly and aggressively for our sons and daughters. We doggedly believe that, in life and in death, our sons and daughters belong to God and will be delivered, healed and raised to new life.

Fourth, the story gives us pause to rethink our attitudes toward those whom we, like the disciples, urge Christ to send away. Accursed people still cry out for Christ's mercy and we send them away. The church excludes them. If you're one of those excluded people don't give up on Christ's mercy. Don't go away! Don't take the <sup>initial</sup> silence of Christ as a sign of his displeasure. Don't allow his <sup>initial</sup> words to put you off. Keep shouting for mercy. We may pray for many things we shouldn't have. But when we're shouting for Christ's mercy, don't take "No" for an answer.

Jesus invites us to the table to give us mercy. He doesn't ask us to settle for crumbs. He invites us to receive the gift of himself -- the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation. The Risen Christ is present this morning to welcome all who come in faith, repentance, and love.

Let us pray: We do not presume to come to your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own goodness, but in your all-embracing love and mercy. We are not worthy even to gather up the crumbs under your table, but it is your nature always to have mercy. So feed us with the body and blood of Jesus Christ, your Son, that we may forever live in him and he in us. Amen.