

## The Canaanite Woman

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 18, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a; 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28.

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

Last night a young Canaanite man approached me outside the church. He worn no shirt. Tatooes covered his arm. I was getting into my car after the wedding reception. He saw my clerical collar and came shouting, "Preacher! Preacher! You're a preacher aren't you? I can tell by your collar." "Yes", I said. "I'm a preacher." "Can you help me? I've got this addiction. I'm hooked on heroin. <sup>My old woman left me. She won't</sup> ~~I'm going to shoot up again~~ <sup>let me see my little two year old "Faith" - That's my daughters</sup> ~~tonight. I haven't had anything since ten o'clock this morning~~ <sup>name,</sup> ~~and I need another shot.~~ Can you help me?"

I was expecting him to ask for money. But he said, "I'm not asking for money. I have money. I just want you to pray for me."

<sup>Hospital. Detox.</sup> ~~And my first thought was, "I don't want to just pray for you. I want to help you."~~

But he said, "Preacher, <sup>just</sup> ~~will you~~ pray for me? You believe in prayer don't you?" So I prayed for him and with him - right out there on the street. And I told him I'd pray for him last night and today. And so I'm asking you to pray for this young Canaanite man. His name is Tony.

I call him a Canaanite ~~man~~ because he's outside the church. He's not a member of the people of God. He's cursed with the addiction of heroin.

<sup>Ancient</sup>  
The Canaanites lived in Palestine before the people of God entered the Promised Land. God told <sup>The Israelites</sup> his people to drive <sup>them</sup> out, ~~to~~ wipe <sup>them</sup> out, to destroy the ~~Canaanites~~. The Bible says that God cursed the Canaanites. Just like Tony whom I met outside the church. Tony was cursed with heroin addiction. He was outside the people of God. And he came to me, like the Canaanite woman came to Jesus, asking for nothing more than God's mercy.

Tony had greater faith than a lot of God's people. He knew ~~than many of God's own people~~ that what we need <sup>most</sup> from God ~~more~~ ~~than anything else~~ is mercy.

Listen to the story of another Canaanite. Her name is Verleen. A minister told me about Verleen. It's a true story about what happened in his church.

"In my last congregation", he said, "we decided that we need to grow. We voted to launch a program of evangelism. We used our denominational program. The program advocated a system of door-to-door visitation. We organized ourselves into groups of two and on a Sunday afternoon, we set out to visit and to invite people to our church.

"The teams went out, armed with packets of pamphlets describing our congregation and our denomination. Each team was given a map with their assigned street.

"Helen and Gladys were given a map. They were clearly told to go down Summit Drive and to *turn right*. Their instructions were very clear. "Go down Summit and turn right! Do you have that Helen and Gladys? Turn right!"

"Helen and Gladys were both close to eighty years old and were more used to giving directions than listening to them. So they went down Summit and turned left. <sup>right into Canaanite territory</sup> To the right were the nice, new homes up on the hill. To the left was an old, run-down neighborhood where nobody but poor <sup>Appalachian</sup> people lived. So Helen and Gladys proceeded to evangelize the wrong neighborhood and the wrong people.

"Late that afternoon, each team returned to the church to make their report. Helen and Gladys had only one interested person to report about, a woman named Verleen. Nobody else was interested in coming to church. Nobody but Verleen. She lived with her two children in a three-room apartment in the projects - that's what they were called, the projects. Verleen had never been to church in her life. She was a Canaanite. She was not one of God's people.

"Next Sunday, Helen and Gladys proudly presented Verleen at the eleven o'clock service, along with her two scruffy looking children. Verleen liked the service. She'd never been in a worship service before. She liked the worship service so much that she asked Helen and Gladys if she could attend the Women's Thursday Morning Bible study. Helen and Gladys said they'd pick her up on Thursday.

"On Thursday, Verleen showed up with a new Bible Helen and Gladys gave her. I was leading the Bible study", my friend told me. "I read the story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness from Luke, chapter 4. 'Have any of you ever been face with temptation and, with the help of Jesus, resisted? Have any

of you refused some temptation because of your Christian commitment?'

"One of the women told about how, just the week before, there was some confusion at the supermarket checkout line, and before she knew it, she was standing in the supermarket parking lot with a loaf of bread that she hadn't paid for. At first she thought she'd just keep it. But then she thought, 'No, I'm a Christian.' So she went back and paid for the loaf of bread.

"That's a good example of resisting temptation," my friend said. "Does anybody else have an example?"

"Verleen spoke up. 'A couple of year ago' she said, 'I was into cocaine really big. It makes you crazy. Well, anyway, my boyfriend, not the one I've got now, but the one who was the daddy of my first child, well, we robbed a gas station one night to get money for coke. We got two hundred dollars. Well, my boyfriend says, 'Let's rob that Seven-eleven down on the corner.' And something in me says, 'No, I've held up that gas station with you, but I ain't going to hold up no Seven-eleven.' So my boyfriend, he beat me up. But I still said No. It felt great to say No. It's the only time in my life I ever said No to anything. It made me feel like somebody."

Stunned silence. Then my minister friend said, "Well, yea, that's real good example. Let's close in prayer." Most of God's people don't feel real comfortable ministering to Canaanites.

Verleen is a twentieth century Canaanite woman. She's not a member of the people of God. She needs God's mercy. She's willing to eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.

I believe that Jesus was faced with one of his most severe temptations when the Canaanite woman came up to him. He knew that Canaanites were cursed. He knew that God has told his people to drive them out, to wipe them out, to destroy them. So he was tempted to reject her. To send her away empty handed. We can't be too careful about evangelizing the wrong kind of people. But after a hard struggle, Jesus rejected the temptation. He turned to the Canaanite woman. He heard her prayer. He answered her prayer. He commended her for her faith. She got saved.

We're faced with the same temptation. I want our church to make a serious commitment to evangelism. What could be a more opportune time then now as we prepare to go into our sanctuary upstairs. I want our church to look beyond ourselves to those outside - to those outside the faith here in Oxford. To those outside the faith in India, Africa, Asia, Europe, North and South America. We're faced daily with the temptation to turn away from the Canaanites and to minister only to ourselves.

We still live among Canaanites. We live among Canaanites whom God has place under a curse. I intentionally use that objectionable language that the Bible itself uses. Objectional because most of God's people don't really <sup>believe</sup> live the world is under a curse. But God has come to us in Jesus to show us that God drives out, wipes out and destroys his enemies by converting them. In baptism God's enemies are killed and raised to new life. The Canaanite woman was not a member of the children of God. She was a member of an accursed race. God destroyed her by

converting her and that's what he wants to do with each one of us.

One more thing. All of us need to realize that we're all Canaanites. None of us are Jews. All of us are gentile Canaanites, under God's wrath and curse. God's enemies. We're here, not because we're better than those who aren't here - we're here because God has converted and is converting us to Christ. Let's come to the sacrament of Holy Communion next week, not as people who feel we have a right to God's love, grace and mercy - but as people who know that even the gentile dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.

"Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David. For demons torment us and our loved ones. Do not send us away. Lord, help us. And help us, in turn, to reach out to those who are not yet your children for we believe that you have imprisoned all in disobedience so that you may be merciful to all."