

Proper 15a 2020  
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC  
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The Rev. Catherine Tatem

Genesis 45:1-15 Psalm 133 Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 Matthew 15:21-28

The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew:

<sup>21</sup>Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup>Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.’ <sup>23</sup>But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.’ <sup>24</sup>He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ <sup>25</sup>But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ <sup>26</sup>He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ <sup>27</sup>She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ <sup>28</sup>Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.

In the gospel of Matthew we are still reading in the section of “miracles, controversies, and the Cross.”<sup>1</sup> What category is today’s reading (pericope)? Today’s miracle is the healing of a Canaanite woman’s daughter; imbedded in the story are several controversies. Remember that Matthew’s gospel is addressed primarily to early Jewish followers of Jesus; that is, what we would call Jewish Christians. This group is keeping the laws of Moses and are following Jesus. That the woman is Canaanite lets us know that she is pagan, a Gentile, and she is following Jesus at this moment, pleading for Jesus to heal her daughter of a demon. We remember the words with which Jesus sent out his disciples a few chapters ago:

‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, <sup>6</sup>but go rather to *the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*’

As a pagan or Gentile, this woman is not one whom the disciples would heal. Listen, though, to how the woman cries out: it is the same tone/word used by the

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<sup>1</sup> Sacra Pagina series, Matthew, p. 5.

blind, the demons, and the disciples in a boat during a storm. It is the same fearful shout of Peter sinking in the sea, the crowds saying “hosanna” as they enter Jerusalem, crowds calling for Jesus’ death, and the cry of Jesus in his last breath.<sup>2</sup> This is a voice of desperation, of life and death, of glory and of unrelenting defeat. It is a cry for mercy.

Our beloved Jesus ... ignores her. The disciples beg Jesus to make her stop shouting, to send her away, healed or unhealed. Make the desperate voice stop. We want to do that with desperate voices, right? Make them stop. Jesus’ reply: ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,’ which, to me, is a completely unsatisfactory response. What happened to feeding and healing the people? We do not know why Jesus responds in this way, and there are several theories. What we do see and hear is that the woman is masterful in her approach. She calls to Jesus as Lord, the Son of David, putting herself in Jesus’ genealogy, his family line. (How?) Matthew’s gospel begins with a genealogy:

“This is the birth-record of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham. (etc.)” Imbedded in the genealogy are several women: Rahab, Tamar, Ruth, the wife of Uriah, and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Rahab, Tamar, and Ruth are Canaanite women, so Jesus and this woman have a common heritage through their Canaanite background. The woman is part of that same family history. In spite of what the culture may say, she is not an outsider. Masterful.

Miracle or controversy?

Have you ever felt that desperate? Insistent? Demanding? We shout out to whoever will listen. It is good to shout out to our Lord and our God, to expect a miracle. Stand your ground with God, with your plea for mercy. She does not back down. I wonder if we have ever been mad enough, outraged enough, to do battle with Jesus. To so overcome our expectations of “perfect Jesus” that we finally get real and honest ... with Jesus.

We do not know why Jesus insulted her, calls her a dog. That was a common insult for pagans, Gentiles, and it pointed out in a rather rude way their *ritual* uncleanness. She does not let the insult rule the day, but points out that even dogs/puppies can live on the scraps, that desperate need for mercy can be filled with what others throw away. This woman argues with Jesus and wins. She is the only one who ever argues with Jesus and wins.

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<sup>2</sup> Website: [leftbehindandlovingit.com](http://leftbehindandlovingit.com)

Miracle or controversy?

Jesus, finally, listens. He knows that he was called to be with the Israelites, the chosen people of God. This woman of no standing in society teaches him something new. That she, too, is worthy, that she IS part of Jesus' family, the human family. That faith includes the laws written on our hearts. The laws of mercy and compassion and healing are the rules of God.

The woman gets her miracle. Jesus heals her daughter, and not through the touch of our earth-bound Savior, but through the woman's faith in what that Savior can do. In a way, Jesus is present even when he is absent. His healing can come from any distance – from the touch of his hand, from us reaching up and touching his garment, from our faith in what our Lord can do. Jesus heals from close at hand and from far away.

Remember how crumbs can feed us, then and now. The “amount” of Jesus that we receive is not quantifiable by a few loaves of bread or by Jesus having a harsh moment. We are part of Jesus' family tree. The overarching theme is that God saves all of God's children; Jesus came so that all may be healed when we turn to him. We, as Christians, have Jewish roots. The God of the Old Testament is the same God of the New Testament.

Cry out, brothers and sisters, when you need to: for yourself, for others, for the injustices around us, that all might know mercy. God is still present.

Lord, have mercy.