

## **Matthew 15: 21-28**

**HEAVENLY FATHER, YOU RESTORE WHAT IS LOST, HEAL WHAT IS WOUNDED, AND GATHER IN THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN REJECTED. GIVE US THE FAITH TO SPEAK AS STEADFASTLY AS DID THE CANAANITE WOMAN, THAT THE OUTCAST MAY BE WELCOMED AND ALL PEOPLE MAY BE BLESSED. AMEN.**

**A PASTOR WRITES ABOUT A VISIT TO THE ISLE OF LEWIS IN SCOTLAND. "THERE IS A VERY ODD THING THAT HAPPENS ON SUNDAY MORNING ON THE ISLE OF LEWIS. YOU SEE, PEOPLE WHO LIVE BESIDE EACH OTHER, WORK WITH EACH OTHER---NEIGHBORS, FRIENDS, WORK COLLEAGUES---ON SUNDAY MORNING AT 10:00 ALL GET INTO THEIR OWN CARS AND GO TO DIFFERENT CHURCHES. NOW THEY ARE ALL PRESBYTERIAN...BUT SOME PEOPLE GO TO THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND, TO THE NATIONAL CHURCH. SOME PEOPLE GO TO THE SAME PLACE, BUT THERE IS A BUILDING BESIDE IT, AND IT IS THE FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND. IT GREW OUT OF A SCHISM IN THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND: THE PRESBYTERIANS HAD A FIGHT IN 1929, AND THE FREE CHURCH STAYED SEPARATE. SOME PEOPLE GO TO THE FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, WHICH IS A SCHISM FROM THE FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND. BUT THEN SOME PEOPLE WHO USED TO GO TO THE FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH NOW GO TO THE ASSOCIATED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF THE FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BECAUSE THEY HAD AN ARGUMENT OVER ONE OF THEIR LEADERS WHO APPARANTLY ATTENDED A CATHOLIC FUNERAL FOR A COLLEAGUE, AND SO THERE WAS A MAJOR FIGHT IN THE FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH. SO NOW SOME PEOPLE WHO USED TO GO TO THE FREE CHURCH NOW GO TO THE FREE CHURCH CONTINUING, WHICH IS A SCHISM OF THE FREE CHURCH,**

WHICH IS A SCHISM OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND. THEY ARE ALL PRESBYTERIANS.

EVERYONE GOES TO THEIR DIFFERENT CHURCHES. DISAGREEMENTS OVER DOCTRINE, OVER LEADERSHIP, OVER MONEY, OVER PERSONALITIES ALL CAUSED THESE VARIOUS FIGHTS OVER TIME.

WHO'S IN AND WHO'S OUT? IT'S A NAGGING AND DIVISIVE QUESTION AND, SAD TO SAY, WE'RE VERY GOOD AT DECIDING. OF COURSE, MOST OF THE TIME IF NOT ALL OF THE TIME, WE PUT OURSELVES ON THE INSIDE, EVEN WHEN IT COMES TO RECEIVING GOD'S GRACE AND MERCY. AS ONE AUTHOR PUT IT SO BLUNTLY: 'YOU CAN SAFELY ASSUME YOU'VE CREATED GOD IN YOUR OWN IMAGE WHEN IT TURNS OUT THAT GOD HATES ALL THE SAME PEOPLE YOU DO.'

YOU CAN'T GET MUCH MORE INSIDE/OUTSIDE THAN OUR STORY FROM MATTHEW ABOUT JESUS, HIS DISCIPLES, AND THE CANAANITE WOMAN. FOR SOME UNKNOWN REASON, JESUS LEFT HIS STOMPING GROUNDS OF NAZARETH AND GALILEE AND HEADED NORTHWEST, INTO THE REGION OF TYRE AND SIDON, REFERRED TO BY THE JEWS AS "PAGANLAND." THERE HE MET THE ULTIMATE OUTSIDER (WHICH IS KIND OF FUNNY TO SAY, SINCE HE'S IN HER NEIGHBORHOOD AND NOT VICE VERSA). SHE'S NOT JUST A WOMAN---NOT EVEN JUST A GENTILE WOMAN—NO, MATTHEW IDENTIFIES HER AS A CANAANITE WOMAN! IDENTIFYING THIS GENTILE WOMAN AS A "CANAANITE" RAISES ALL SORTS OF RED FLAGS FOR JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES. THE CANAANITES WERE THE ARCHENEMIES OF AND GREATEST DANGER TO THE ISRAELITES WHEN THEY CROSSED THE JORDAN RIVER INTO THE PROMISED LAND. THEY WERE PAGANS. THEY WERE UNCLEAN. THEY WERE OUTSIDERS, EVEN IN THEIR OWN LAND

(OR AT LEAST THE ISRAELITES CONSIDERED THEM OUTSIDE THE REACH OF GOD'S GRACE AND MERCY).

SO, HOW DID THIS CANAANITE WOMAN, WHO LIVED IN PAGANLAND AS THE ULTIMATE OUTSIDER FROM GOD'S GRACE AND MERCY, KNOW TO CALL JESUS "LORD, SON OF DAVID"? HOW DID SHE KNOW TO ASK HIM FOR MERCY AND HEALING FOR HER DAUGHTER? THE ULTIMATE OUTSIDER---THE ONE PERSON IN THE STORY YOU WOULD LEAST EXPECT TO KNOW WHO JESUS IS, MUCH LESS HAVE FAITH IN HIM---IS THE ONE WHO "GETS IT RIGHT."

TO SAY THE LEAST, THIS GOSPEL STORY IS QUITE DIFFICULT TO HEAR, ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU CONSIDER HOW JESUS TREATS THIS DESPERATE MOTHER. FIRST, HE GIVES HER THE SILENT TREATMENT. NEXT, HE SEEMS TO WRITE HER OFF WHEN HE TELLS HIS DISCIPLES (BUT WITHIN EASY EARSHOT OF THE WOMAN), "I WAS SENT ONLY TO THE LOST SHEEP OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL." THEN, FINALLY, AND PROBABLY WORST OF ALL, JESUS APPEARS TO INSULT HER WITH A COMMON JEWISH SLUR AGAINST GENTILES. GRANTED, HE DOESN'T COME RIGHT OUT AND CALL HER A DOG, BUT IT DOESN'T TAKE MUCH IMAGINATION TO HEAR THAT IN HIS COMMENT TO THE BEGGING MOTHER, "IT IS NOT FAIR TO TAKE THE CHILDREN'S FOOD AND THROW IT TO THE DOGS."

BUT THE WOMAN SIMPLY WILL NOT BUDGE. HER RESPONSES TO JESUS REMIND ME OF THAT GAME WE USED TO PLAY AS CHILDREN WHERE TWO OF US WOULD STARE INTO EACH OTHER'S EYES, EACH TRYING TO MAKE THE OTHER BLINK FIRST. JESUS ALL BUT CLAPS HIS HANDS IN THE WOMAN'S FACE, BUT SHE DOESN'T BLINK. "YES, LORD," SHE SAYS, "YET EVEN THE DOGS EAT THE CRUMBS THAT FALL FROM THE MASTER'S TABLE." WHEN SHE SAYS THAT,

SOMETHING CHANGES IN THE STORY. A CHANGE YOU CAN HEAR WHEN HE REPLIES: “O WOMAN, GREAT IS YOUR FAITH.” “BE IT DONE FOR YOU AS YOUR DESIRE.” AND HER DAUGHTER IS HEALED.

SCHOLARS AGREE THAT THIS ENCOUNTER WAS A TURNING POINT FOR JESUS BECAUSE UNTIL THIS EXCHANGE, JESUS’S EARTHLY MINISTRY HAD BEEN EXCLUSIVE...FOR THE LOST SHEEP OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL ONLY. YET AFTER THIS MEETING, JESUS’S EXCLUSIVENESS WAS NO LONGER THE FINAL WORD. AND BY THE END OF THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW, THE FINAL WORD OF THE RESURRECTED JESUS IS: “GO THEREFORE AND MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS.”

DID THIS CANAANITE WOMAN, WHO STARTED OUT AS AN INTERRUPTION AND INTRUSION, HELP JESUS SEE HIS MINISTRY IN A NEW LIGHT? DID JESUS LEARN FROM OTHERS? OR DID JESUS KNOW ALL ALONG HE WAS SENT FOR EVERYONE AND WAS TAKING THIS ENCOUNTER AS A TEACHING MOMENT FOR THE DISCIPLES?

IT SEEMS THAT GOD’S CALL TO US MEANS PUSHING OLD BOUNDARIES, EMBRACING “OUTSIDERS,” GIVING UP THE NOTION THAT THERE IS NOT ENOUGH OF US TO GO AROUND. THE CALL OF GOD KEEPS AFTER US, CALLING US BY NAME, UNTIL WE FINALLY STEP OVER THE LINES WE HAVE DRAWN FOR OURSELVES AND DISCOVER A WHOLE NEW WORLD. I CAN’T EVEN COUNT HOW MANY TIMES GOD HAS CALLED ME TO TAKE A RISK, TO STEP OUT IN FAITH AND MY IMMEDIATE RESPONSE IS TO DRAW A LINE. I WANT TO SAY I AM TOO BUSY. I WANT TO SUGGEST SOMEONE ELSE’S NAME. AS HARD AS I TRY TO DRAW THE LINE, IT

DOESN'T WORK. GOD'S INSISTENT CALL KEEPS AFTER ME UNTIL I AM IN A NEW EXPERIENCE AND IN EVERY CASE I HAVE ALWAYS GOTTEN MORE THAN I HAVE GIVEN.

THE BEST LESSON I HAVE LEARNED IS THAT GOD'S FACE CAN TURN UP ANYWHERE, AND ESPECIALLY ON THE FAR SIDE OF THE LINES WE DRAW TO PROTECT OURSELVES: IN THE FACE OF A CANAANITE WOMAN, OR IN ANY FACE THAT TURNS TOWARD US SEEKING HELP, SEEKING CARE. THE CALL OF GOD IS INSISTENT, AND WHENEVER WE LIMIT WHO WE WILL BE FOR OTHER PEOPLE OR WHO WE WILL LET THEM BE FOR US, GOD GETS TO WORK, RUBBING OUT THE LINES WE HAVE DRAWN AROUND OURSELVES AND CALLING US INTO LIMITLESS ACTS OF HIS LOVE.

WHAT DOES THAT MEAN, DAY TO DAY? IT MEANS NOTICING THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TIMES WE ARE HANGING BACK, CLINGING TO OUR LIMITS, AND THE TIMES WE ARE MOVING OUT, PUSHING INTO NEW AND OFTEN FRIGHENING TERRITORY. IT IS A DIFFERENCE YOU CAN *FEEL*; THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WITHDRAWING FROM PEOPLE; FAILING TO MEET THEIR EYES, KEEPING A TIGHT REIN ON YOUR FEELINGS, ALWAYS PROTECTING YOURSELF. IT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THAT AND PUTTING YOURSELF IN THE PATHS OF STRANGERS, BEING THE FIRST TO EXTEND YOUR HAND, FEELING EMPATHY FOR SOMEONE WHO DON'T PERSONALLY KNOW, TRYING NEW THINGS....MAYBE EVEN CHANGING YOUR MIND ABOUT SOMEONE. A POEM SUMMARIZES OUR GOSPEL READING TODAY:

DO WE WISH TO LEARN THE MEANING OF GOD'S LOVE AMONG US?

LET US LISTEN TO THE WORDS OF THE CANAANITE WOMAN WHO KNEW SHE HAD A PLACE AT THE TABLE. THE CLOUDS HAVE PAUSED THEIR TRAVELING TO LISTEN TO THE SONG, THE

**SONG OF FAITH CHRIST HEARS HER SING IN WITNESS TO THE WELCOME OF GOD'S LOVE. SEND THE LETTER TO THE CITIES, TO THE LONELY HIGH-RISE DWELLERS, TO THE STRANGER, TO THE POOR. TELL THEM THEY HAVE A PLACE IN GOD'S HEART. DIAL THE TELEPHONES OF THE HURTING, THE ILL AND THE DESPAIRING; BRING THEM IN THEIR NEEDINESS TO THE HEALING IN THE WELCOME OF GOD'S LOVE. THE BIRDS HAVE SUNG THEIR PRAISES TO THE BEAUTY OF THE MORNING, OF A NEW DAY BEGINNING, REJOICING IN THE BOUNTY OF GOD'S GOODNESS. THE WORDS ARE ECHOED IN THE BLOSSOMS, IN THE SUNRISE, IN THE STARLIGHT: THE WORDS THAT WELCOME US TO OUR PLACES IN GOD'S HEART. DO WE YEARN TO SEE THE FACE OF GOD, TO KNOW THE NEARNESS OF HIM? MAY WE LIFT THE BLINDFOLD FROM OUR EYES ON THIS NEW DAY. AMEN.**