

Sermon, August 27, 2023

Matthew 15:21-31

“Jesus and the Canaanite Woman”

Jesus is traveling through the region of Tyre and Sidon and is suddenly chased by a woman from Canaan shouting that her daughter was being tormented by a demon. This, of course, was a time when people were unaware of modern medical knowledge, and often assumed that illnesses, whether physical or psychological, were caused by supernatural forces such as demons. Jesus, however, seems unconcerned, and keeps walking, as the disciples complain about her shouting, asking him to send her away. Jesus' reply is surprising when we consider that he is thought of as a universal figure. He says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”, leaving us to wonder if his own understanding of his mission evolved over time.

But the woman was persistent, running over and kneeling before him, blocking his way and asking for help. This appears to have angered him, because his answer was, in fact, very rude. He said, “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” Again, this ties into his previous statement. The children he is referring to are the Israelites, and “dogs” was a common insult the Israelites used in reference to Gentiles. But her reply, catches Jesus off guard, pointing out that even dogs partake of the crumbs that fall from the master's table, and Jesus sees this as a sign of “great faith”.

Now compare this to two other gospel stories and see if you can detect a common thread. The first comes from the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John when Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at a well and asks her for a drink. The woman is astounded that he, a Jew, would ask a Samaritan for a drink. Jesus replies, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink’, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water”. Their conversation continues and she begs him to give her this living water. She is then astounded that he knows many things about her personal life. The disciples then show up and are perplexed that Jesus was talking to a woman, which was something a man did not do in public in that time and culture unless he was related to her. The woman would then go and tell everyone about their conversation, and in verse 39 we hear, “Many Samaritans from the city believed in him because of the woman's testimony”.

Then, in the 8th chapter of Matthew we have the story of Jesus' encounter with a Roman centurion who comes to Jesus asking him to heal his servant who is paralyzed, to which Jesus complies and heals the servant. Then speaking of the centurion, he says, "Truly I tell you in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." Clearly, we can see from this that Jesus' ministry extended far beyond the children of Israel, and that it also ties in with what I was talking about last week. Jesus had no problem relating to each of these people who belonged to a different religion than his. But consider this as well. The Israelites had been at war with the Canaanites ever since the Jews escaping from Egypt had crossed over into the Promised land. The Jews also despised the Samaritans, and the Romans were the present oppressors of the Israelites. Jesus was obviously serious, and demonstrated by his own behavior, the importance of his teaching concerning love of enemies.

These three stories also have something to say about the nature of faith. I was recently reading a brief critique of the Apostle's Creed, which we recite each Communion Sunday, and the writer said, "It states merely that he was born in an unusual way and died in an unusual way, telling us nothing about the fact that Jesus *lived* in an unusual way". (Forrest Church) Now, I have spent a good portion of my life studying the doctrines of the church as exemplified in the Creeds, and they certainly have their place. The Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed were originally written as an aid to the reading and interpretation of scripture. But at its very core Christianity is not so much about beliefs as it is about a way of life - a way of life that is often contrary to the ways of the world - a way of life revealed in the way that Jesus lived his. And at the very heart of Jesus' way of life was trust - a trust in the benevolence and power of God - a trust that we see exhibited in the three characters that I have spoken of today, even though they did not share Jesus' religious beliefs.

The Apostle's Creed invites us to believe in the Virgin Birth, the death and resurrection of Jesus, his ascension into heaven, and his coming again to judge the living and the dead. And, again, I am not saying that they are unimportant, but it does not say anything about how we are to love God, as well as to love our neighbor and our enemies, to care for the poor and the oppressed, to be self-sacrificing for the sake of the common good, to advocate for peace and social justice, to heal the sick and comfort the dying, to reach out to the lonely and depressed, to bear witness to the love of God, and, above all, to place our trust in Him! As Jesus lived, so are we called to live as well. Amen.

**Let us pray:** We give you thanks, Eternal God, for those who have run the race of faith before us and now surround us like a cloud of witnesses. We thank you for those who pass the word of your love to each new generation. We thank you martyrs and saints who give themselves in love for you and in the pursuit of peace and Justice on earth. We give you thanks, infinite God, for the church around the world. We thank you that we count as our brothers and sisters in Christ, people of all races, tongues, and nations. We thank you for those who witness faithfully amid political or economic oppression. May all your people, wherever they are, be one. With faithful people of all ages, may we be Christ's body on earth, for it is in the name of Christ that we pray...Amen.