



"The Jesus Narrative— Unworthy Dogs!"

by *Matthew Christians*

based on *Matthew 15:21-28*
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the
Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

So, can you believe the gall of that woman?!! I mean, Jesus gave her the cold shoulder after all, you think she could just take a hint! But no! She just wouldn't take no for an answer. She just kept coming back and back and back. No matter what Jesus said to her, she just kept coming back like a bulldog . . .

. . . with a faith that wouldn't let go no matter what.

That's what the Gospel reading is all about this morning: God's universal grace to all in Jesus and the faith of a bulldog that won't let go no matter what.

In our Gospel reading this morning, from Matthew chapter 15, we actually catch up with Jesus as he's taking a little vacation. Yes, even Jesus occasionally needed some time off. It turns out that Jesus was taking some time off on the north coast, the region of Tyre and Sidon. Gentile country. And as it so happens, a local woman approaches Jesus.

Now, that all sounds innocent enough, doesn't it? And it would be if this scene were being played out today. But what would this mean 2000 years ago? Well, the first thing that stands out is that a woman is approaching a man uninvited. Now this may

sound terribly sexist, and it probably was... but in the culture of that time, this is one of those things you just didn't do... one of the things you just didn't see. A woman did not approach a man in public. (I'm not making judgments; just telling it like it was!)

On top of that, this isn't just any woman, this is a Canaanite woman. Now Canaanites and Jews had been enemies for centuries. In Jesus' day, they're living in an uneasy truce, but Jews and Canaanites still didn't like each other very much. Think of Palestinians and Jews today, multiply it times a hundred and you're close to understanding the antipathy that existed between these two ethnic groups! A Canaanite simply wouldn't dare approach a Jew without causing an incident.

So why does she do it? An unaccompanied woman, a Canaanite no less, approach Jesus? The answer is simple: this wasn't just a woman. This is a mother. A mother who doesn't know where else to turn. A mother whose little girl is sick. A mother whose little girl is demon-possessed and suffering. Jesus is her last and only hope. And so she cries out: "*Son of David, have mercy on me!*"

Actually, wait a minute. That's a strange thing for a Canaanite woman to say. "*Son of David*" is the Israelite term for the Messiah. But the Canaanites weren't Jewish. They had their own gods— Molech and Mot, Baal and Anat. They didn't acknowledge the God of Abraham. Why is she calling out to Jesus as the "*Son of David*"? I don't know, maybe she's just being cagey. Maybe she's trying to pretend she's an Israelite so that Jesus would heal her daughter. Maybe she's thinking Jesus wouldn't notice her accent or her facial features. Maybe she's trying to trick Him into thinking she's a Jew so He'll give her His blessing.

The real question, though, is how will Jesus answer her? What will Jesus do in response? And the answer is... nothing. Stoney dead silence. You see, Jesus will not be tricked or manipulated. Jesus is no vending machine into whom you plug your nickels and dimes of pious phrases and out pops your blessing on demand. There's no "name it and claim it" with Jesus.

Seeing this now... the disciples suddenly decide to get involved. They think

they've got Jesus all figured out, see. They jump on the bandwagon and start saying to Jesus, "Hey, master, since you're not interested in talking to her, why don't you just tell her get lost? I mean, we all agree... she's a pain; she's following us all over the place, making a whole lot of racket. Tell her to her to get outta here."

Did you catch that? What did the disciples just say? Did it sound familiar? It should... because you've heard that voice before. It's the voice of exclusion, the voice of prejudice, the voice of hatred. It's the voice of suspicion toward the outsider and the stranger and the unclean and the unwashed and the unbelieving. It's a teaching, a worldview, a prejudice that had been drilled into the disciples' heads from childhood. Canaanites were the descendants of Canaan, the cursed grandson of Noah. "Don't go near those people. Don't talk with them, eat with them, touch them. And don't you ever think of marrying one of them!"

Now the story starts to heat up. Just as Jesus seemingly ignored the cries of the Canaanite woman, so now Jesus ignores the disciples. He turns and speaks to the woman. Having seen through the woman's pious pretense, what He does is let her know that He's not fooled. He knows she's only pretending to be a Jew. *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel,"* He says. Which was basically saying, "I know you're pretending to be an Israelite, but you can't pull the wool over My eyes." And that's true. There is no pulling the wool over Jesus' eyes. There's no tricking God.

And so she tries again. But this time, she appeals to Him in a different way: *"Lord, help me,"* she says, now begging on her knees. This woman wouldn't take no for an answer. Notice there's no more pious "Son of David" smooth talking. No more false pretense. Now it's just the prayer of someone desperate for help, desperate for mercy. Now it's just the prayer of someone who has no recourse but to beg, *"Lord!" "Lord, help me!"*.

"It's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." That's the response of Jesus. That's what He says. Can you believe that? *"It's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."* Is this the Jesus we know and love and

worship? The Jesus who says *"Come to me with your burdens?"* (Mat. 11:28). He calls her a "dog," which was an even bigger insult than you might think. I mean, no one here would think this was a compliment, but you have to understand that dogs were considered especially dirty disgusting animals in Jesus' day. Actually, they still are today if you go to the Middle East. No self-respecting person in Israel or Palestine or anywhere in the Middle East would ever keep a dog as a pet. Dogs aren't pampered pets, they're garbage-eating scavengers. And "dog" is what Israelites called Canaanites. Dog was the pejorative term. It's a racial slur. This'd be like calling a black person today by the "N" word. It's nasty and it's crude.

But here's where the story take a U-turn. An unexpected twist. Jesus has just spoken the crudest, nastiest thing you can imagine, but yet... the woman doesn't leave. She still refuses to go away. And she doesn't stop praying. She doesn't get angry at His words... in fact, she agrees with Him. "Yes, Lord. That's right. Dogs don't deserve the bread of the table, but they do get to lick up the crumbs that fall from their master's table." See, she's got Him, and she's not about to let Him go.

That's faith talk. Faith talk from a Canaanite! An outsider. A non-Israelite. Nor is this some weak yappy puppy-dog faith. This is a bulldog faith that locks its jaws on Jesus' words and won't let Him go. Crumbs from her master's table are a feast for her, and she won't be denied. Oh, she may be a dirty Canaanite dog, but she clings in hope to Jesus, trusting that He's bigger than Israel, trusting that His mercy is wide enough to embrace even the likes of her.

"O woman, great is your faith," Jesus says. He honors her and commends her faith. Faith that demands to be given to. Faith that doggedly clings to Jesus even when He appears to reject her. Faith that hears a "yes" buried inside the Lord's "no." Faith that won't let go of Jesus,. *"Be it be done for you as you desire,"* Jesus says to her— warmly, gently now, accepting. And the moment He speaks those words, the demons leave her little daughter, and she is healed. Just a word from the Word Incarnate, and the devils flee.

It's a fascinating account, wouldn't you say? I mean, what's really going on here? What does it mean? Did you notice that it doesn't say a single word about the disciples? It must have left those disciples wondering, "What on earth is Jesus up to? I thought He agreed with me about those Canaanites, but then He goes and has compassion on them?!" I imagine they spent some time reflecting on this little episode, how an outsider to Israel can have greater faith than the insiders.

It should make us think, too. It should make us think because we've walked in the disciples' sandals ourselves. We've judged the outsider. We've excluded those who make us uncomfortable. We've drawn lines and shut doors. We SAY that Jesus is the Savior of the world, but we ACT as though He were the Savior of people like us... of people who think like us... people who look like us. We're pretty good with the exclusive side of Jesus, but a little slow on the inclusive part— what our dogmaticians call universal grace. It makes us more than a bit uncomfortable to think that Jesus really is the Savior of the world, including those parts of the world and those people in the world whom we don't particularly like.

The disciples needed a new image of faith: the faith of the outsider, the Canaanite, the dirty dog. And I hate to break it to you, but we need that view too. The last thing we need is to start to take pride in our piety, our purity, our religion, our doctrine, our liturgy, or whatever other credential we try to parade before the Lord. The point is this: we don't, we can't... none of us deserve goodness from God. We are ALL like that poor Canaanite woman... we don't have a single chip to bargain with the Lord. And don't you dare try to fool Him with a pious accent. We are beggars... beggars who have no greater prayer than, "*Lord, help me.*"

Each and every Sunday, the Divine Service puts us in the doghouse. "I, a poor, miserable sinner." "Lord, have mercy." The Law does that. Declares us all to be dirty dogs. Sweeps away every pretension. Shuts our mouths of all boasting, every way that we've learned to butter up God with our religions. The Law declares everyone to be a sinner, it magnifies and amplifies sin to be utterly sinful. You think it's bad? It's worse

than you ever imagined! We're as good as dead dogs, says the Law.

But with the Lord, dogs get the crumbs that fall generously from the Master's table, and those crumbs turn out to be rich fare. "*Take, eat this is my Body given for you; take, drink, this is my Blood shed for you.*" This is Jesus talking. The same Jesus who went to the dogs in His death on that garbage dump of a hill outside of Jerusalem where your sins and all the sins of the world were dealt with once and for all. Dogs never had it so good as when they are under this Master's table.

And that's you. That's me. First Peter chapter 2: "*Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*" Despite your foreign status, you have been baptized and named a child of God. Despite your sin and sinfulness, you have been declared forgiven, justified, sanctified. Despite the fact that you have no inherent right to eat and drink from the Master's table, you have been given a place in the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom which has no end. You, conceived and born in sin and death, have been embraced in the death and life of Jesus.

Scripture calls it "grace" - undeserved kindness from the heart of God to the least, to the lost. Undeserved kindness from God's heart to your dirty dead "dog" of a sinner's heart. That's grace, amazing grace, universal grace, inclusive grace. And all in Jesus. And in Him, baptized and believing in Him, you are no longer dirty dogs but children of Abraham, sons and daughters of God, with a place at the Master's table. In Jesus' precious, all-embracing, saving name, Amen.

May the peace of God –which surpasses understanding– guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

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