

Reflection on the Scripture: Matthew 15:21-28

[\[The video of the reflection.\]](#)

There is a Jesus in this story that I don't recognize. He ignores the Canaanite woman's pleas for mercy. His disciples ask him to send her away because she is so annoying, and instead of telling them to pipe down, he draws a line and tells her she is on the wrong side of it. She persists and he calls her a dog.

He's come to the non-Jewish district of Tyre and Sidon. In all likelihood, he's trying to get away from the Jewish crowds who have been following him around, demanding that he heal their sick. But that isn't anything new. When we saw him with the bread and the fishes and the 5,000 men, not counting the women and children, he was trying to take a minute and grieve the murder of his cousin and friend, John the Baptist. When the crowds followed him there, and the disciples told him to send them away, Jesus told them to pull themselves together and feed the crowd.

But this time, he's ignoring and then declining to help this Canaanite woman. The Canaanites are the people who lived in the land of milk and honey when God led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Like our own story of coming to a new land as immigrants, there was someone already on the land whose presence complicated the plan to just move in and take over. Within Israelite culture, the Canaanites worshipped idols, they were definitely "other", people best avoided or ignored.¹

Yet in Jesus' genealogy we read all the way back in December, back when we read things together in the sanctuary, we read the beginning of Matthew. And in the genealogy of Jesus that Matthew provides, there are three Canaanite women: Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth.² So Jesus himself is the descendent of Canaanite women. And yet he treats her cruelly, ignoring her at first, and then telling her that he was only there to tend to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matthew 15:24) not her and certainly not her demon possessed daughter. He calls her a dog. And there's just no way that calling anyone a dog, then or now, isn't an insult.

There are some ways I could dig into the text to make Jesus more familiar, but in the end, he ignores her, he turns her away, he calls her a dog. And that is not the Jesus I recognize.

¹ Iwan Russell-Jones, "Proper 15, Theological Perspective, Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 356 & 358.

² Russell-Jones, 358.

So do I skip over this story in Scripture, and move on to one where Jesus is more like he was in the Feeding of the 5,000? Well, right now, day to day, I've been looking for Jesus all the time and I'm not recognizing him a lot of the time. If part of my job as a disciple of Christ is to see God in everyone I meet, recently it's been tougher to do that. And here is a story in Scripture that offers some guidance on what to do when you don't recognize Jesus and you really need him.

First, be clear on what you're asking for. The Canaanite woman knows what God has said, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on who I have compassion." (Exodus 33:19) and "I desire mercy not sacrifice." (Hosea 6:6). She asks for mercy from Jesus (Matthew 15:22) because that is how God defines Godself.³ She doesn't ask for healing for her daughter. She asks for mercy.

Second, be clear on whom you asking for mercy from. The Canaanite woman calls Jesus "Lord, Son of David" which is the title of the Messiah.⁴ At this point in Matthew's Gospel, no one has called Jesus the Messiah. The disciples are still figuring it out and everyone else is sure he isn't the Messiah. She is clear that he is and she doesn't hedge her bets. She's loud and clear that she knows who she's talking to and that the fact that he is the Messiah has deep meaning for her.

Third, be humble. The Canaanite woman kneels before him (Matthew 15:25). She is in the presence of the Messiah. She is asking him for mercy. She kneels at his feet and asks for help. She is even willing to be called a dog, seen as a dog. Jesus feels he has been sent only for the lost sheep of Israel, that you don't give food for the children to the dogs? Fine. She'll accept that she may not be number one on his list. But given God's infinite mercy, there is more than enough and the crumbs will be plenty.⁵

Finally, persist. When you are a marginal person, when you are a women with a daughter possessed by a demon, when you are an outsider, a person who belongs to a group that doesn't believe what everyone else believes, you have to persist in the face of a lot of people telling you to shut up.⁶ When you know God has infinite mercy, when you know that the kingdom of God has come to this

³ Russell-Jones, 360.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 62.

⁵ Charles B. Cousar, "Proper 15: Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28" in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A*, ed. Walter Brueggemann et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 450.

⁶ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 179.

world, when you know that the Messiah walks among you, unrecognized, when you can humble yourself because of what you know, stick to your guns. Be loud in your conviction that mercy is available to you and yours. When other folks tell you to pipe down, argue back, from what you know is true, until you bang their heads against the truth hard enough that they realize they knew that was true also.⁷ That all people are created equal. That all of us are entitled to equal treatment under the law. That all our votes count and should be counted.

Perhaps the point of this story is not to focus on the unfamiliar Jesus. But to see what we can do to make ourselves more familiar with the Canaanite woman. There will be plenty of times when we cannot recognize Jesus in situations where we long to know who to follow. Perhaps the point of the story is to get better at recognizing all the Canaanite women who walk among us, demanding mercy for others, reminding everyone that if we believe the kingdom of God is in this world, we better start acting like it. Perhaps then, we will see what Jesus saw. Those Canaanite women have great faith, and their wishes should be made a reality.

⁷ Anna Carter Florence, "Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost," in *Preaching Year A with Anna Carter Florence: Reflections on the Gospel Readings (2016-2017) Revised Common Lectionary*. (St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, 2016), 107.