

## TIME AFTER PENTECOST: LECTIONARY 20 (PROPER 15) (A-RCL)

August 16, 2020

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Psalm 67; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:[10-20] 21-28

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*Ecumenical Prayer Cycle: Liberia; Sierra Leone*

While the focus of today's Gospel is on the Canaanite woman's interaction with Jesus, her dogged, persistent seeking of mercy is on behalf of her daughter. Because of that mother-daughter relationship, and because my daughter is here with me for the time being, Kerstin will be joining me to provide commentary throughout the sermon. [*Please note: The text in purple was read by Kerstin.*]

Now, to begin: Jesus enters the district of Tyre and Sidon. So far, so good. But "just then": A Canaanite woman comes out toward Jesus and "starts shouting". The Greek word used here – κρᾶζω (*krazo*) – means to cry out, shriek, scream, screech. It is the disciples' same cry of fear, "It is a ghost!" when they see Jesus walking on the water toward them (Matthew 14:26). It is the same cry of Peter, "Lord, save me!" when he begins to sink in the sea. (Matthew 14:30). And it is the same cry as the death-cry of Jesus from the cross (Matthew 27:50). *This* is the woman's cry! – a cry pulled up from deep within.

The woman who shouts, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David ..." (Matthew 15:22) is, according to Matthew, a Canaanite. This is the only single independent usage of this term in what we call the New Testament. Why does Matthew choose to use "Canaanite"? Perhaps it is because of the long-standing enmity between Jews and Canaanites. Perhaps it is because she does not

worship the God of Israel. Or perhaps it is Matthew's way to acknowledge her ancestral relationship with Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew opens with "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, son of Abraham." [Matthew 1:1] In addition to Jesus' mother Mary, only four other women are mentioned in this genealogy list, two of whom – Tamar and Rahab the prostitute – are Canaanites.

Note that, though not of "the house of Israel", the Canaanite woman dares to cross the ethnic divide, addressing Jesus as "Son of David." From her personal anguish she cries, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

Jesus' first response to the mother's anguished plea is silence. [Pause.] In fact, Jesus does not answer her at all! [v. 23] – Of course, in a way that silence *is* a response. Peter Bregman, in an article in the Harvard Business Review, calls silence "the worst kind of feedback." [<https://hbr.org/2010/01/how-to-handle-silence-the-worst.html>]

I think that anyone who's ever experienced the silent treatment, or who's ever been talked over or dismissed, could empathize with this woman. This could also be true of anyone who's ever been in a meeting at which they offered a great idea, only to have their words disregarded – as if they weren't even present – only to have someone else offer the same idea, which is now met with enthusiasm and acceptance. And, to me, this is all related to "mansplaining," which is "what occurs when a man talks condescendingly to someone (especially a woman) about something *he* has *in*complete knowledge of, with the mistaken assumption that he knows more about it than the person he's

talking to does.” [<https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/mansplaining-definition-history>, emphasis added] This gospel passage gets at a gritty issue that we don’t want to talk about sometimes for fear of those in power being uncomfortable. But we cannot stay silent anymore. We must persist and persist loudly!

Indeed, the Canaanite woman *does* persist – and, apparently, she indeed persists **loudly**! The disciples are annoyed; they can’t hear themselves *think* with all that screeching and shrieking for mercy. (At Children’s Church earlier this morning, the children suggested, “Jesus won’t help if she’s screaming.”) So the disciples do the logical thing: They practically beg Jesus to send her away! [v. 23].

(The disciples *have* had practice in trying to send people away before: Two weeks ago, we had the story of the feeding of the 5000 men – plus women and children. There, as evening approaches, the disciples ask Jesus to “send the crowds away” so they can go buy themselves something to eat.) But in *that* story Jesus’ response to the disciples is, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” [Matthew 14:16]

At this point in *today’s* story, though, the disciples are not asked to help ease the situation. Instead, Jesus responds – using words this time: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (v. 24). Is this statement a reminder for Jesus to keep the focus on the original mission? Or is it a reminder to the *woman* that she is an “outsider”? Or is it a combination of the two?

To me, the disciples clearly see the woman as a problem here! This brings to my mind the example that the wishful

thinking and active complaining on the part of the current administration in its COVID-19 response do not make the coronavirus “problem” go away either.

Not only does the Canaanite woman **not** go away, she approaches closer, and – in a sign of respect – kneels before Jesus and requests simply, “Lord, help me.” In the words of Pastor Barbara K. Lundblad: “This is where Jesus goes to the dogs.” [“Matthew 15:21-28: Teaching Jesus” [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/on-scripture-matthew-15-teaching-jesus\\_b\\_921497](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/on-scripture-matthew-15-teaching-jesus_b_921497)] For Jesus says, “It is not fair – it is not morally right – to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” [v. 26]

Perhaps this woman has heard racist slurs before, but, knowing that the health of her daughter is at stake, and knowing *deep down* that Jesus has the power to help her, she persists. New Testament professor, Mitzi J. Smith, puts it this way: “The Canaanite woman persists. Like Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, Oprah Winfrey, Senator Hillary Clinton, [First Lady] Michelle Obama, Senator Elizabeth Warren, and Senator Kamala Harris, the Canaanite woman persisted. [...S]o many anonymous women like the Canaanite woman have persisted as lone minority voices among a majority of authoritative and powerful men. She persisted! She didn’t go away; she won’t be dismissed.” [Mitzi J. Smith, “Commentary on Matthew 15:[10-20] 21-28”, for August 20:2017 [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3360](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3360)]

This reminds me of intersectionality, the theoretical framework developed by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, which has evolved into a way to understand and analyze how different

aspects of a person's identity (things like gender, sex, race, class, religion, physical appearance, national origin) combine to create particular & unique forms of discrimination and privilege, acknowledging that subjective personal experience creates differing experiences, differing identities. This woman in the Gospel is facing several layers of removal from privilege, several layers of being told no, several layers of rejection and insult. And yet, she persists. And yet, she maintains hope. And yet, recognizing who Jesus is, she keeps faith.

Your mention of intersectionality reminds me of an article in the August issue of *Living Lutheran*. Gigie Sijera-Grant is a Filipina-American and an ELCA pastor. She says that when she was in seminary, "a well-meaning Asian male pastor" warned her: "'You've got a double whammy. You are a woman and a person of color.'" Back then she didn't understand what he meant, but, she adds: "I do now." "Throughout my 17 years of ministry, I've seen sexism, patriarchy and racism manifested by the church in subtle ways." [*Living Lutheran*, August 2020, Volume 5 Number 4, 14-15, p. 15.]

So, yes, Jesus does say to the woman: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But, picking up on the metaphorical crumbs Jesus has tossed her, she replies, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." [v. 27] To which Jesus exclaims, "Woman, great is your faith!" [v. 28]

I'd like to note at this point that there have been various efforts to make Jesus' initial three responses less harsh and more palatable. One such interpretation is the claim that they were

spoken to “test” the strength of the woman’s faith. But if her daughter’s healing were to be dependent upon the amount of her mother’s faith, what would that say to parents who have prayed – and prayed desperately and diligently – for a child’s healing, only to have the child continue to struggle with a debilitating mental illness or a life-threatening addiction, or only to have the child die? Was their faith not “enough”?

But the Canaanite woman has not made any direct confession of faith, so something else is going on here – although I think it’s interesting that Jesus’ praise of the Canaanite woman’s “great faith” comes so closely after last Sunday’s story of Jesus chiding Peter for his “little faith.” [Matthew 14:31]

That was when Peter came walking on the water toward Jesus, got distracted by the strong wind, became frightened, and began to sink, right?

Yes, that’s when Jesus said to Peter, “‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’” The mother in today’s story has approached Jesus with nothing, no “If-you-are-this,-then-that” request like Peter’s “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” [Matthew 14:28] She comes with nothing except her deep concern for her daughter and her trust that Jesus will give her what she is seeking ... [Brian P. Stoffregen, Exegetical Notes on Matthew 15.(10-20) 21-28 Proper 15 - Year A <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt15x10.htm>]

... and her persistence. She comes with her persistence.

Yes, and perhaps her fearlessness.

And how about her quick-wittedness – when she comes back with a response about dogs eating their masters’ crumbs?

That, too! – A word about the broken pieces, the crumbs: Not all commentators agree on what the mother is asking here. One interpretation is that “the crumbs from the table that Jesus sets will be more than enough to satisfy [the Canaanite woman],” [Comment to Mitzi J. Smith, “Commentary on Matthew 15:[10-20] 21”, for August 20:2017-[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3360](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3360)] Another is that she’s only asking Jesus to spare a few crumbs of grace, and that she indeed receives her crumbs when her daughter is healed. [Brian P. Stoffregen, Exegetical Notes on Matthew 15.(10-20) 21-28 Proper 15 - Year A <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt15x10.htm>] Pastor Lundblad, however, disagrees when she says: “The Canaanite woman taught Jesus that she and her daughter deserve more than crumbs.” “Surely there’s enough for me and my daughter. That’s what Jesus finally [hears] and [comes] to believe.” [“Matthew 15:21-28: Teaching Jesus” [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/on-scripture-matthew-15-teaching-jesus\\_b\\_921497](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/on-scripture-matthew-15-teaching-jesus_b_921497)] “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” [v. 28]

While we’re on the subject of eating and being fed, we could even say that this “outsider” mother *fed* Jesus – by breaking open for Jesus new understandings of the extent and diversity of God’s community.

If Jesus could be transformed by the encounter with the Canaanite woman, might we also be transformed by our encounter with the other? Could we also learn from someone who looks, believes, or acts differently than we do?

To that end: As part of each interfaith event I host on campus – such as my 23rd Annual “Braided Streams: Women of Faith Speak” panel presentation right before Spring Break this

year – we read Leonard Swidler’s Dialogue Decalogue [Journal of Ecumenical Studies 20 [1984]: 1-4.] The Decalogue opens with these words:

“The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn; that is, to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality, and then to act accordingly.”

Valarie Kaur is a civil rights activist, lawyer, and filmmaker; she is also a practicing member of the Sikh faith. In her recently published book, aptly named *See No Stranger* [*See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*. New York: One World, imprint of Random House, division of Penguin Random House, © 2020 by Valarie Kaur], she speaks about deep listening as “an act of surrender.” She says, “We risk being changed by what we hear.” [p. 143] She acknowledges from profound personal experience that listening to someone who is “absolutely abhorrent” or whose beliefs are disgusting, enraging, even terrifying, is extremely difficult. She says: “When listening gets hard, I focus on taking the next breath. . . . Listening does not grant the other side legitimacy. It grants them humanity – and preserves our own.” [p. 167]

So, with this talk of listening and transformation, I’m wondering: Who are the Canaanite women in our midst today? – Who are the ones treated as dogs? Whose stories do we need to hear?

There are *many* – perhaps *overwhelmingly* many – responses to those questions! One that comes to mind is close to home – right here in the ELCA: During 2019 and 2020 we have been celebrating 50 years of Lutheran women being ordained in

the United States, 40 years of women of color being ordained, and 10 years of LGBTQIA+ individuals being able to serve freely. Yet: “On average, women of color wait three to five years to enter their first (and sometimes subsequent) pastoral calls. Forty-five percent report receiving compensation below synod compensation guidelines.”

[[https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Gods\\_Faithfulness\\_on\\_the\\_Journey.pdf?\\_ga=2.20459064.1260617660.1597156227-1599739475.1597156227](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Gods_Faithfulness_on_the_Journey.pdf?_ga=2.20459064.1260617660.1597156227-1599739475.1597156227)]

Can we not somehow take some of that Canaanite woman’s spirit out into the world today as we seek mercy for the troubles of our own lives and our broken world, too? In fact, how can we NOT persist throughout rejection and insult on our journey towards justice and healing? Silence and derogatory insults have been flung at persistent women and dissidents throughout history – but we must keep the faith. We must keep hope for healing.

Pastor Sijera-Grant is one person working to do just that! She says, “In my role as president of the ELCA Association of Asians and Pacific Islanders, I’ve learned that it’s not enough to speak for one’s [own] community. It’s crucial to connect and work together with the other ethnic associations so we can speak in a unified voice – **loud** enough that the wider church will hear us and respond to our common needs.” [*Living Lutheran*, August 2020, Volume 5 Number 4, 14-15, p. 15; emphasis added.]

So, let us today, with the Canaanite woman in this Gospel reading, raise our voices – and raise them loudly and persistently on behalf of those in need of care, concern, and compassion!

Yes, who are the “outsiders” interrupting us, demanding that we listen to their stories? Who are the children for whom we need to raise our voices, hurling our prayers and petitions to Jesus? [See Ronald A. Klug, “Rise, Shine, You People!” *ELW*665:3b: “your songs and prayers against the darkness hurling.”] What will help us persist over the long haul? How might we be disciples who join together – not to stifle or turn away those who are different from us, but to advocate for the marginalized, the “other”? How can we, like Jesus, be open to transformation, to being changed by those we encounter?

Let us go out into the world this week as we seek our own answers to these open-ended questions. I challenge you to be persistent in your questioning, in your searching, in your pursuit of justice.

AMEN