

## Great is Your Faith

**Scriptures: Psalm 133**  
**Matthew 15: 21-28**

Several years ago I went to a conference in Chicago sponsored by the Seminary Consortium on Urban Pastoral Education (or S.C.U.P.E.). It featured as one of the keynote speakers a renowned African-American preacher from Kansas City, “Mac” Charles Jones. Rev. Jones was an immense man in many ways: probably weighing in at over 300 lbs., of imposing stature and dignity, and immense charisma. With some other pastors from troubled urban areas around the country, he had planned and convened the first national gang summit, in which gang leaders from the ghettos of urban America came to Kansas City and put down their weapons and pledged to work cooperatively together to address the root issues causing the problems in their communities. It took someone of Rev. Jones’ stature and strength to pull off such a meeting, and I was saddened a few years later to learn of his death. They don’t make them of his mold very often... a great man, in every way.

Ever since hearing him preach in Chicago, I’ve wanted a chance to tackle the text he preached from that day. And it just so happens to be the New Testament lectionary text for today, Matthew 15: 21-28, the story of the Canaanite woman. This story is intriguing to me because it doesn’t fit the mold. It’s a story in which Jesus is not the hero. It’s a story where he appears to be more human than divine. And it’s a story where a Gentile woman has something to teach the Son of God.

Perhaps the lectionary scholars place it here in the liturgical year because it’s such a troubling story. Perhaps they wanted to kind of sneak it in when no one was watching, in the middle of August, figuring that you wouldn’t be here to hear it, but off somewhere on vacation. Perhaps they didn’t know what to make of Jesus seeming to be narrow minded and bigoted, and hoped we wouldn’t pay too much attention to it, that it would just kind of slip away before anyone noticed.

But you noticed. And I noticed. And now, what are we going to do with it? As Mac Charles Jones said, it’s a troubling text, and I invite you, as he said, to “*wrassle*” with it with me. We may not come to any conclusions. But that’s O.K. There are some parts of the Bible like this, parts we just have to “*wrassle*” with.

This is a story where Jesus and his disciples are acting any way but the way they should. We always imagine Jesus to be so loving, so welcoming, so compassionate and caring to the poor and to those in need. And his disciples were poor folk themselves, common fishermen and tradespeople, whose job it was to help those in need hear about Jesus and come to him for healing. What we see here is just the opposite. Jesus doesn’t want to be troubled with the woman. And the disciples try to get him to send her away. Why?

Well, first of all, we have to note where the story takes place... way up north, in the district of Tyre and Sidon. This is outside of ancient Israel, across the border and in foreign territory. The ancient Phoenicians had once controlled this land, and the people there were Canaanites, Gentiles, ancient rivals of the Jews for the control of the Promised Land. What were Jesus and his disciples doing there, if this was the case? We don't know for sure, but probably they were trying to get away from it all for a while, to escape the crowds of Jews in Galilee, who had heard of Jesus' miraculous powers and were hounding him at every step, pestering him for cures to their problems. So Jesus and the disciples were on retreat, on vacation, getting away from it all, in a place where nobody would know them.

Or so they thought. Somehow this Canaanite woman, whose daughter it says was possessed by a demon, had heard of the Jewish miracle worker, Jesus of Nazareth. She'd tried everyone else, and nobody had been able to help. She was a desperate woman, and willing to try anything, anyone who might be able to heal her daughter. She heard that Jesus and his gang were in the area, and so she tracked him down.

I can imagine how glad Jesus must have been to be found there, up in "Vactionland," by this needy woman. It had been going so well. He'd finally been getting some "R & R," he hadn't even checked his voice mail or texts once while he'd been gone... and suddenly, here's this hysterical woman, shouting at him to do what he'd been trying to get away from... another miracle healing.

Past this level of it, however, we need to "*wrassle*" with the deeper implications of Jesus's and the disciples' chilly reception of the woman. At first, it says, Jesus did not answer her at all. He ignored her. After all, he was on vacation, and she was not only a woman, but a pushy woman, and Gentile at that! Three strikes against her, in the ancient Jewish way of thinking.

Women had no standing in the ancient Middle East, no rights, no power. They were chattel, property, objects. This was true of Canaanite culture as well as Jewish culture. Women had no right to bother a man, particularly a stranger. And any upstanding Jewish man would never speak to a strange woman, particularly a Gentile, as this woman was. Jesus and his disciples were acting as any Jewish men would, whether on holiday or not. They would have nothing to do with this woman.

Yet we have come to expect something more from our Jesus than being a male chauvinist of this sort. (Notice I didn't say "pig," because he was Jewish, after all !) We expect our Jesus to reach out to the needy and the outcast, and here he acts like she's invisible. "*But he did not answer her at all,*" it says. Anyone who has been in a position of being marginalized in a society knows how hurtful it is, to be ignored, overlooked, treated like you're of such little value that you're invisible, by someone who has the power to help. And that's exactly what was going on here. Jesus ignored her and her problem. And his disciples, the ones who were supposed to make sure that those who were in need could get access to his healing powers, say: "*Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.*"

And then it gets worse. Jesus, ignoring the woman, not even addressing her directly, says to his disciples: *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”* Not only is he appearing to be a male chauvinist, but also racist as well. Gentiles, non-Jews, are not his intended audience. They are outside of the scope of his concern. They are not worthy of his attention or of God’s saving power. Here again, he is showing his cultural conditioning, as part of the ethnically exclusive Jewish community of the day..

But the woman persists. She breaks into the exclusive club, she *“crashes the party,”* as Mac Charles Jones put it, she shakes up the old-boy network, with the one tool in her power, her determination. (*“Nevertheless, She Persisted...”* Have you seen the tee shirts and bumper stickers with this motto on them, as I did just this week?) She gets out in front of them, and kneels down in the road, saying: *“Lord, help me.”* She uses her body to block their way, and her voice to cry for help. Mac Charles Jones referred to this as the first example of non-violent direct action in the Bible. The powerless woman stops the whole show.

Here Jesus gets angry. *“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”* he says. He calls her a dog, as most Jewish men of the day would have referred to Gentiles as “dogs.” Can you imagine this? Our Jesus, calling a poor woman and her people dogs? What’s gotten into him? Has he lost his perspective? Is he really God after all?

Now if you had been the woman, what would you have done? Would you have taken this kind of stuff from them? I don’t know about you, but if it were *me*, I’d have been mightily offended. I’d probably turn and kick the dust off my heels, or spit at these haughty foreigners. But does the woman take offense? Does she stop? Is she deterred? No. She just keeps on. She has a faith in Jesus that allows her to believe in him even when he wasn’t acting like himself.

*“That’s all right,”* she probably said to herself. *“I’ll take it from you this time, this once.”* And she comes back with an answer to Jesus that astounded him and astounds us two thousand years later: *“Yes, Lord,”* she says, *“but even the dogs eat the crumbs from the master’s table.”* Oooh!... We don’t know how to take this. It sounds so self-deprecating, like she’s accepting the derisive label she’s been tarred with. For a strong woman to humble herself in this way must have been excruciating. But she did it, because of her daughter, and because she saw through the affront and the un-Jesus-like behavior to the real identity of Jesus as Savior. She believed in him, even when he wasn’t acting like himself. She claimed his Savior role for him, even when he was being a jerk to her. She trusted that God could do great things through Jesus, even when he had no intention of responding to her need.

Here we see the whole humanity of Jesus revealed, and it’s not all pretty. He was a man of his times and culture. He was limited in his perception and understanding. He had some growing to do. And thank God, he did it.

The Canaanite woman challenges him to deal with her, to take her need seriously, to enter into relationship with her, even if it's only to throw her daughter a few crumbs of healing. She demands that he start acting like a Savior of the world, not just of the House of Israel. And finally Jesus hears the challenge and makes a choice.

He chooses to move beyond what he has known. He chooses to move past his understanding of social relationships up to this point. He chooses to overcome his prejudice and acknowledge the common humanity of this persistent woman. In a change of heart he accedes to her plea, saying: "*Woman, great is your faith. Let it be for you as you wish.*" And "*instantly,*" it says, her daughter was healed.

Centuries of prejudice collapse in this moment. The gospel expands beyond the narrow confines of Judea and the "Chosen People." The King of the Jews now becomes the Savior of the World, almost in spite of himself. God works through this Gentile woman on Jesus of Nazareth, and not the other way round.

Will you "*wrassle*" with me on this? Can you handle it? I think Jesus had something to learn, some growing to do. The woman knew this about him. She had a "*hold on*" kind of faith, as Mac Charles Jones put it, a "*won't give up*" kind of faith, which saw past the immediate reality of his actions and words to the way God wanted things to be. She held him ultimately accountable to be the kind of Messiah she knew God meant him to be. And by so doing, she helped him to become all that one day he actually would be.

This is the kind of faith we need to have in each other: a "*hold on*" and "*won't let go*" kind of faith, a faith which calls forth the best in each other, even when we're not living up to our true potential, because we know instinctively that God equipped us to be so much more than what we've been to this point. We need to hold each other accountable to be all that we're called to be, as Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ. We need to persist in our hope and expectation of healing, for our loved ones and for this troubled nation and for this troubled world of ours. We need to have a faith so great that no one is a stranger to us, so great that we live together in unity with all our kindred, no matter of what race or clan, so great that we trust in the God who made us all and who believes in us all, even when we aren't acting like ourselves.

This is what we can learn from the Canaanite woman, who called Jesus to task. "*Woman, great is your faith!*"

Thanks be to God. Amen.