

**Matthew 15:21-28***Pew Bible N.T. pg. 16*

<sup>21</sup> Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup> Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." <sup>23</sup> But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." <sup>24</sup> He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." <sup>25</sup> But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." <sup>26</sup> He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." <sup>27</sup> She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." <sup>28</sup> Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that moment.

**Response to the Word**

L: This is the Word of God for the people of God

**P: Thanks be to God!**

Matthew 15:21-28

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"The Crumbs That Fall"

Rev. Amy Terhune

On his late night talk show – at least, before the writer's strike – comedian Stephen Colbert would regularly interview guests for a special segment he called "The Colbert Questionert" (the "t" at the end is silent...) This segment asks a celebrity guest 15 questions, most of which, only require a short, concise answer, or at most, a sentence or two, so it goes pretty quick. Colbert claims that his "Questionert" covers the full spectrum of human experience and thus, celebrities are fully known upon completion. The questions include things like: best sandwich? Favorite smell? Most used app on your phone? And so forth. But the final question (#15) is "Describe the rest of your life in five words". A lot of celebrities really struggle with this question. Some try to come up with a five-word sentence, counting out the words on their fingers. Others will list a series of adjectives or a couple of phrases. [for all 15 questions, see <https://www.listchallenges.com/the-colbert-questionert>. To see clips of the Colbert Questionert, check out: <https://www.cbs.com/shows/the-late-show-with-stephen-colbert/>].

The truth is that I suspect a lot of us would struggle to encapsulate the rest of our life in five words. I certainly would. When I do a funeral, I get to use a couple of thousand words, at least. But I imagine that if our nameless woman from today's scripture lesson had to answer the Colbert Questionert, she'd have an easier time. Maybe I'm reading too much into all this, but I image her quoting the five words Jesus spoke to her in today's lesson: Woman, great is your faith!

Which sounds lovely, doesn't it. Except that we've just read the entire exchange, and it's anything but lovely. Most of us shake our heads when we read this. We're just not sure what to do with this picture of Jesus. But before we dive into that, let's put the lesson in the context of what's happening around it in scripture. Remember that Jesus has fed 5000 men and their families with five loaves and two fish. Then he went up the mountain to pray, and sometime in the middle the night, he comes walking across the water to meet the disciples as they're rowing their boat back over to Galilee.

In the morning, he heals a bunch of folks and then gets into a rather heated exchange with Pharisees and scribes who've come up from Jerusalem to shame Jesus for his failure to follow ritualistic cleansing laws for washing and eating. And Jesus upbraids them for it. Not because ritual and tradition aren't important, but because the scribes and pharisees tended to use those things to divide

people – to say who is in and who is out. For Jesus, the difference was between knowing the law, and knowing the *author* of the law. He tells the crowd it's not what goes in that defiles a person, but what comes out. In other words, it's not what you eat, but what's eating you. Are you consumed by arrogance, envy, pettiness, hate? Sin is the real pollutant of the human soul. And after offering that lesson, our scripture today picks up: Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting...

Now, I'm going to stop right there before we get into what she's shouting about. Some have asked the question: why does she come out shouting? The old saying goes that you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. But I'm really not a big fan of victim-blaming. Maybe she comes out shouting because Jesus is in a crowd. Matthew notes that great crowds surround Jesus both in vs 10 and vs. 30, so it's entirely possible that she has to shout to be heard in the crowd. Then again, Jesus is in a new location in today's lesson, and Matthew doesn't note the presence of a crowd. So maybe she shouts because Jesus and the disciples have already been ignoring her. Matthew tells us that Jesus doesn't answer her until forced to do so. We'll talk more about that in a minute. Maybe she's shouting because she's desperate to be heard. Her child is sick, her world is caving in on itself, her fears are eating her alive, she's on edge, she's anxiety-ridden – is it any wonder she shouts? Or maybe – maybe she's a difficult woman. The abrasive type who is as likely to say "screw you" as "thank you" when you do something nice. We all know the type. Even today, difficult women get side-lined, ignored, and passed-over. They get labeled with words I won't say from the pulpit. They don't have refined manners. They've made some bad choices. So it's easy to justify our habit of sidelining them.

A few years back, Brad and I saw a movie called "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri." It's not an easy movie to watch. Frances McDormand plays Mildred Hayes, a mother whose teenage daughter was murdered. Mildred is an abrasive woman. Her last conversation with her daughter had been an argument where they both said some terrible things to each other, and Mildred is torn up with guilt about that. But the truth is that every relationship she has is either broken or dysfunctional. She swears. She drinks. She's rude. As six and then seven months tick by with no progress on the case and no suspects, Mildred's solution is to put up three billboards on the way out of town to shame the community police department into doing something. Her actions create hostility, division, and controversy in town. But she's been through the school of hard knocks, and the police chief, played by Woody Harrelson, seems to feel some compassion for her. At one point, he notes that she's just a mom who wants justice for her kid. As characters go, it's hard to call her a hero. She's a messy character, plagued by foibles and flaws. But then again, maybe we all are. Some of us are just better at hiding it.

Now, I don't know that the Canaanite woman in today's story is a difficult woman. Some would say I shouldn't even suggest it – that it is victim blaming. But that's not my intention. Rather, my intention is to make us think, because all of us deal with somebody difficult in our lives, somebody abrasive, somebody who, when their name flashes on the caller ID, we roll our eyes and wonder if we have the patience to deal with them today. And I wonder if we wouldn't find more meaning and more patience if we learned to have compassion for them instead of ire or frustration. It's worth applying the scripture to the nitty gritty of the real word.

But of course, this is where things get rough, because Jesus doesn't exactly give us a shining example to work with, does he? How are we supposed to understand this? What do we do with this image of Jesus? As noted, Jesus has just taught that it's not what goes into the mouth that defiles, but rather, what comes out of the mouth, for our words come from our hearts. And yet, no sooner has he taught about how our words can defile us, when he turns around and, confronted with a woman desperate for him to heal her daughter, calls her a dog!

We know that Jesus is fully human and fully divine, so is this a glimpse of the human Jesus caught in a moment of weakness? Is his weariness making him short-tempered? Is he jesting with her? Is he testing her? Is he testing his disciples? Read enough commentaries and you'll find a wide assortment of theories and explanations. I honestly can't tell you with any certainty why Jesus responds to her initial request as he does. But we might do better to ask ourselves: why does the gospel writer include a story that paints Jesus in such unflattering light? What's the point? What can we learn?

Well, I've already suggested that maybe we're supposed to think about how we deal with difficult people in our lives. Or maybe – regardless of Jesus' actions here – we should understand this woman as an example for us. She crosses barriers of race, religion, and geography to come to Jesus. She meets barriers of prejudice and malice. She even meets with insult—be it testing, teasing, or transgression on Jesus' part. But despite all these obstacles, she perseveres. She does not burst into tears and run off when she meets opposition. She is so committed to her child that she cannot help but do otherwise.

"When Henry Ward Beecher was a young boy in school, he learned a lesson that he never forgot. He was called upon to recite in front of the class. He had hardly begun when the teacher interrupted with an emphatic, "No!" Henry started over and again the teacher thundered, "No!" Humiliated, Henry sat down. The next boy rose to recite and had just begun when the teacher shouted, "No!" This student, however, kept on with the recitation until he completed it. As he sat down, the teacher responded, "Very good!" Henry was irritated. "I recited just as he did," he protested. But the instructor replied, "It is not enough to know your lesson, you must be sure. When you allowed me to stop you, it meant that you were uncertain. If all the world says, "'No!' it is your business to say, "'Yes!' and prove it."

"Commenting on this story, an unknown commentator has said, "The world says, "No!" in a thousand ways:

"No! You can't do that."

"No! You are wrong."

"No! You are too old."

"No! You are too young."

"No! You are too weak."

"No! It will never work."

"No! You don't have the education."

"No! You don't have the money."

"No! It can't be done."

"And each "No!" we hear has the potential to erode our confidence and our hope bit by bit until we quit altogether. [12 ¶s adapted from <http://www.geocities.com>; as used in "Worried About Her Child" by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] If you're anything like me, you watch the news right now, and it seems like "No, No, No" is everywhere. No, peace isn't possible. No, we cannot defeat illness. No, humankind will never be selfless enough to end hunger or reverse climate change. No, humankind will never arise from the craters of racism, misogyny, homophobia. And it's true that we've got a lot of problems that need our attention and our work. Problems sell news. But I would remind you that we are less racist, less misogynistic, and less homophobic than we were 100 years ago. We're working towards the point where we will eradicate Malaria from the planet. We're studying diplomacy and peace-making in ways few other time periods in history ever have. There is cause for hope. Don't give anyone else power over your hope. This mother persevered when she met with 'no'. And her faith, her tenacity, her hope – it was rewarded.

Another lesson that may be worth noting is that the audience of Jesus' day did not have the same sense of 'inalienable' rights, the same sense of equality and freedom. Nothing Jesus says to this woman would have seemed out of place or derogatory to a listener in those days. What would have stunned them, however, was first, that Jesus would engage in debate with a gentile woman. That was something reserved for men, for scholars, for Jews. To debate this woman is to give her enormous respect. Not only that, but when the woman responds, Jesus acknowledges the validity of her argument—something any other Jewish rabbi would never have done. He acquiesces to her! You're right, he says. Woman, great is your faith!

The woman's reply is stunning in its audacity. It is brilliant in its logic. It is shocking in its depth of theological insight. This gentile, by all accounts, pagan woman knows Jesus is holy and she goes to God. He calls her a dog, and she calls him Lord. When Jesus says it's not right to take from the children and give to the dogs, this woman essentially responds, "but Lord, there's enough for both. You have enough to share with everyone. God has enough. God has enough for me too."

And she right. And Jesus knows she's right. We constantly butt our heads against a scarcity mentality. And not just with money and stuff. Grace, love, energy – all is scarce. "I love Halford Luccock's description of people who "always measure themselves out with a medicine dropper, frightened lest they spend a drop more than the legalities of the situation demand." I've known folks like that—little souls who are so afraid to give themselves away, lest there be nothing of themselves left; folks who have not yet discovered that the only real way to find ourselves is to give ourselves away." [¶ adapted from "On Doing Beautiful Things" by Donald B. Strobe; [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Whatever else we may say about this woman, she did not measure life with a medicine dropper. She may have been difficult and abrasive. Or maybe not. But she was tenacious, and she persevered in hope. She saw God and engaged with her whole self and her whole heart, regardless of the all the "no's" in her path. And the result was wholeness, both for her and for her daughter.

Centuries ago, the apostle Paul, in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of his second letter to the Corinthians, writes about a difficulty he faced. He called it 'a thorn in his flesh'. We don't know what that means. But we do know that Paul prayed about, asked the Lord to take it away. And he reports in his letter that the word that came back to him from the Lord was this: My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

My grace is sufficient, says God. In other words, my grace is enough. In the brokenness, the hardships, the foibles and flaws that make us human – these are where God's power shines through. This is where we find the strength to love, to advocate, to live. Abrasive people. Difficult circumstances. In a harsh world. My grace is sufficient, says God. Our nameless Canaanite mother understood that intuitively. The crumbs that fall are enough. They're sufficient. They're what she needs. They're what she treasures. And they're what change her life. And they're what can change ours, too. May it be so. Amen.