

Proper 15A  
Matthew 15: 21-28  
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## Learning

Today's gospel can be startling, causing us to stop and think.

I imagine that for most of us, it's easy to lean into the idea of Jesus as Divine. Jesus, the Word, the Logos, the Holy One who was and is and is to come: all knowing, all understanding, all loving.

But here's a story about Jesus as human, a Jesus who is learning. Jesus opens himself to seeing something new, taught to him by a persistent woman, who causes him to rethink his position and actually change his mind.

We have here a stark reminder of the nature of Jesus, pushing us towards a better understanding of the truth: that the Son of God — who was born of a woman, who grew to adulthood, and walked this earth — was both fully-divine, and also fully-human. Like us, Jesus learned and grew through encounters with others, coming to understand more about life, relationships, and love, through those experiences. For that is the human experience — we learn from living our lives — and Jesus, like us, learned.

So hold onto that thought and let's take a closer look together at today's gospel.

In Matthew we hear about an outsider, a foreigner, someone who doesn't belong. This nameless woman is described as a Canaanite, one of the rural people representing those the Jews were NOT supposed to fraternize with. A similar story is in Mark, where she's described as the Syphro-Phoenician woman, perhaps a way for Mark to acknowledge the mission to the Gentiles who would become members of the early church. But regardless of these finer points of her origin, we should recognize that she's not a Jew, she's not of the ruling class, and she's obviously not a man. She is *other* — someone who could easily be dismissed and ignored, one of the unseen and unheard.

But she has a need. She wants Jesus' help. Not help for herself, but help for her child, so she reaches out. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David. Help my tormented daughter."

And she receives back silence. I wonder what she heard in that silence. Perhaps that her request was not even worth acknowledging. Or that she herself had no value at all: she was a nothing, a nobody.

But she refused to go away. She annoyingly continued her shouting, finally causing the disciples to ask Jesus to send her away. And Jesus responds, not to the woman, but to his disciples, advising that he was only sent to the people of Israel. His ministry was not to those others.

But still, she continues. Kneeling before Jesus, she asks again. "Lord, help me."

And this time she does get an answer, but not the one she wanted. "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Ouch! Some interpretations of this passage have tried to soften the tone of Jesus' words. Maybe Jesus was speaking about household pets. But historical studies tell us that Jews in the 1st century didn't keep dogs as pets — it wasn't their custom — making it a bit hard to smooth out the sharp edges of the comment. Jesus, like us, is influenced by custom, tradition, and the world around him.

Some Gentile households, however, did keep pets. Perhaps that helped give the women the courage to respond as she did — or maybe it was her God-given gift of persistence — for she reminded Jesus that even dogs get a chance to eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.

Whether it's this final comment that struck home, or the humility of the woman, or perhaps simply the perseverance of her faith — whatever the cause, Jesus responds differently. He sees something new. He has learned from this encounter with the other and changes his mind. This is a transformational moment. In recognition of her faith, Jesus acknowledges her request, and her daughter is healed.

Jesus steps away from what he had been taught all his life — through his traditional Jewish upbringing and the cultural norms of his time — and he shows his willingness to see beyond the assumptions of the world and who should or shouldn't receive his ministry. Jesus is leading us to turn away from those cultural norms that encourage us to exclude and instead see God's presence even in the other, like this Canaanite woman, for all of God's beloved children are deserving of dignity, respect, and love.

We face similar challenges today. It's hard to miss the divisiveness around us, the lack of civility, the hatred that too often is spewed from one to another. We hear the continuing controversy about what was said and not said about Charlottesville, the unrest in other cities, and many have concerns about what may happen next. Divisiveness seems to be in the air we breathe, seemingly making it impossible to find ways to work together on common problems and address today's inequities.

But as Christ-followers, we too can learn. We can follow the path of our Risen Lord, learning to see Christ in all people. Our Lord and Savior does not prioritize some people's lives over others, or teach that some are superior because of race, gender, economic status, sexual identity, or country of origin.

Instead, Jesus teaches us to respect one another and strive together for justice, freedom and peace. It is a struggle — a struggle to step away from what the world tells us, and instead to see others as Christ sees them, with eyes of love.

- Are we willing to learn as Jesus learned, opening our hearts to the possibilities that outsiders — the minority, the despised, and the oppressed — may at times need to be bolder and more persistent in ways that makes us uncomfortable, in order to seek relief and not be ignored?
- Can we open ourselves to being uncomfortable, to identifying where we too may see someone as other — and then lean into that struggle with God and our own perceptions — for this is a struggle of faith. For if faithfulness towards God is our highest goal, how do our own lives need to be transformed in Christ, helping us to turn away from what causes us to exclude.

Persistence and faith are a powerful pair, whether faith leads to persistence or it's persistence that feeds faith. Regardless, Matthew tells us that Jesus commends the Canaanite woman for her faith, and her faith and persistence lead to her daughter's healing.

How is the Spirit nudging us to learn, to open our hearts and spread the Good News through our words and deeds, through hospitality, and acts of kindness. How is Christ encouraging us to invite others into God's beloved community where all are welcome? For it is in community, through continuing in the apostle's teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the Bread and in the prayers, that we, with persistence and faith, can live into the hope of God's kingdom.

I'd like us to end with a prayer, the prayer for the Human Family, found on page 815 of the BCP. It's become our practice at the Wednesday noonday service, to pray this prayer together. I find it particularly helpful to lift up these words in our own challenging times.

Let us pray.

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.