

“The Canaanite Woman With Spunky Faith”

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Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Matthew 5:1-10; 15:21-28

Theme: Faith, humor, grace

Occasion: Series, People of the Bible

We don't know a thing about her. We don't know her name, her background, her looks, or her hometown. She came from nowhere and disappeared just as quickly. She was a flash in the pan – but what a flash she was!

The disciples had been with Jesus for two years and they hadn't done what she did in a few moments of conversation. She impressed God with her faith. The disciples' hearts may have been good; their desire may have been sincere.

But their faith didn't turn God's head. Hers did. For all we don't know about her, we do know one remarkable truth – she impressed God with her faith. After that, anything else she ever did was insignificant. “Woman, you have great faith!” Jesus said.

That's some compliment. Especially when you consider God said it. One would think the Creator would not be easily impressed. But something about this woman brought a sparkle to his eyes, and most likely.... a smile to his face.

Matthew describes her as “a Canaanite woman,” and in so doing she gets two strikes against her. Strike one? – a Canaanite. An outsider. A foreigner. An apple in a family tree of oranges. Strike two? – a woman. She lived in a culture that had little respect for women outside of the bedroom and the kitchen.

But she met the Teacher, who had plenty of respect for her. Oh, it doesn't appear that way. In fact, the dialogue between the two

seems rather harsh. It's not an easy passage to understand, unless you're willing to concede that Jesus knew how to smile. If you have trouble believing that Jesus smiled, you're going to have trouble with this story. But if you don't, if the thought of God smiling brings you a bit of relief, then you'll like what comes next.

Here's my interpretation of the conversation Jesus has with the Canaanite woman. She is clearly desperate. Her daughter is demon possessed. She knows she has no right to ask anything of Jesus. She is not a Jew. She is not a disciple.

She offers no money for the ministry. She makes no promises to devote herself to missionary service. You get the impression, she knows as well as anybody that Jesus doesn't owe her anything, and she is asking him for everything.

But that doesn't slow her down. She persists in her plea. "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Matthew notes that Jesus says nothing at first. *Nothing!* He doesn't open his mouth. Why? - to test her? Most commentators suggest this. Maybe, they say, he is waiting to see how serious she is about her request. How much does this really matter to her?

That makes sense. But maybe there is something else going on here. I think Jesus was admiring her. I think it did his heart good to see some spunky faith for a change. I think it refreshed him to see someone asking him to do the very thing he came to do – give great gifts to unworthy children.

How strange that we don't allow him to do it more often for us. Perhaps the most amazing response to God's gift is our reluctance to accept it. We want it, but on our terms. For some odd reason we feel

better if we earn it. So, we create religious hoops and then jump through them – making God a trainer and us his pets, and religion a circus. “If I’m good enough, God will reward me,” we think.

The Canaanite woman knew better. She had no resume. She claimed no heritage. She had no earned degrees. She knew only two things – her daughter was weak, and Jesus was strong. So she asked.

God has always been, and always will be a God of grace. From the beginning, God only asked that people have faith. Even the laws God created, were for us to find grace. Sadly, people always look for a way to destroy grace – much like the Pharisees did when they added onto God’s law and twisted God’s intent.

But Jesus made it clear that all we need to do to receive God’s grace is believe. This is what the Canaanite woman did. She knew she had nothing to offer. She didn’t rely on her heritage, her race, her clout, her biblical skills – only on Christ.

If only we could do the same. If only we could put down our knowledge, our good works, our religious “hoops.” Christ was enough, and so our faith in Him is enough.

There’s more to our story, though. It’s clear from the text the disciples are annoyed. As Jesus sits in silence, they grow more smug. “Tell the woman to go away,” they demand. The spotlight is put on Jesus – how will he respond? He looks at the disciples, and then looks at the woman.

What follows is one of the most intriguing dialogues in the New Testament. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel,” Jesus says.

“Lord, help me!” the woman cries out. “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs,” he answers. “That’s true, Lord,” she responds, “but even dogs are allowed to eat the scraps that fall beneath their master’s table.”

Is Jesus being rude? Is he worn-out and irritable? Is he frustrated? Is he calling this woman a dog? How do we explain this dialogue; it seems so out of character from the Jesus we have come to know. Bible commentaries offer three options.

Some say that Jesus was trapped. He could not help the woman because he had been sent first to the lost sheep of Israel. But here’s the problem with that theory. He’s already helped the Samaritan woman and the centurion. Why wouldn’t he help now?

Others think Jesus was being rude. Who can blame him? He was tired; it had been a long trip. This request was simply the straw that broke the camel’s back. Do you like that theory? Neither do I. The Jesus I’ve come to know is filled with endless compassion.

Finally, the third theory is that he was testing her, again. Just to be sure she was serious about her request, just to make sure her faith was real. But did he have to insult her by calling her a dog? I don’t think Jesus would do that either. Let me suggest a fourth alternative.

Could it be that Jesus had his tongue in his cheek? Could it be that he and the woman are engaging in satirical banter? Is it a wry exchange in which God’s unlimited grace is being highlighted? Could Jesus be so delighted to have found a person who is not bartering with a religious system that he can’t resist a bit of satire?

He knows he can heal her daughter. He knows he isn't bound by a plan. He knows her heart is good. So, he decides to engage in a humorous moment, with this woman with the spunky faith. In essence, here's what he said:

"Now, you know that God only cares about Jews," Jesus says, smiling. When she catches on, she volleys back, "But your bread is so precious, I'll be happy to eat the crumbs." In a spirit of joyful delight he bursts out, "Never have I seen such faith! Your daughter is healed!"

This story does not portray a contemptuous God. It portrays a willing One who delights in a sincere seeker.

Regardless of exactly *why* Jesus chose the words he did, it's obvious he chose to make an example of the Canaanite woman. Jesus had just been with the Pharisees, who *would* have called her a dog, and meant it!

He had just been with religious rulers who never would have shared their bread. He had just been with the religious uppity-ups who questioned his claims and doubted his authority. So, you can imagine how sweet the woman's word sounded to him, "Lord!

She had made him her Lord even before meeting him. No wonder Jesus delighted in her. No wonder with pure joy - and likely a wide smile – Jesus proclaimed, "Woman, you have great faith!"

Today, do not doubt that Jesus smiles at you as well. If you've made him your Lord, you've put a smile on his face. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Ten Women of the Bible* by Max Lucado; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2016. Chapter 7, "The Canaanite Woman," pp. 145-155.