

THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | AUGUST 20, 2023

ISAIAH 56:1, 6-8 | PSALM 67 | ROMANS 11:1-2A, 29-32 | MATTHEW 15:21-

28

Today's gospel reading is a difficult one to say the least. So to try to get a handle on it, we're going to look at it from three different perspectives. We're going to start with the text itself. We're going to think about the first people who heard this story. And then we're going to reflect on our own context.

So let's start with the text itself. Jesus and the disciples have just traveled into Tyre and Sidon. If you look at a map, this is going north of where Jesus and the disciples usually hang out. This is modern-day Lebanon, which would have been inhabited mostly by non-Jews.

And after they arrive, they're approached by a Gentile woman who asks Jesus to help her daughter. In Matthew's version of this story, he makes a point of calling the woman a Canaanite.¹ Notice she calls Jesus "son of David," which means she acknowledges that he's Jewish. These are two groups of people who don't really get along. So notice how Jesus and the disciples respond. At first, they do nothing. They just ignore her and hope that she'll go away on her own. But she keeps persisting. *She's not going to leave on her own*, the disciples start to think, *So you need to tell her to leave*. So they approach Jesus and say, "Send her away."

And here's the part that we want to unpack a bit. Instead of telling her to leave or ignoring her, Jesus explains why he's not helping her. He says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." This gives us a clue to how Jesus understands his mission and purpose in the world. Why is he here? To teach, heal, and preach for and to the people of Israel. And as we've seen in Matthew's gospel, that is more than enough to keep him busy. So Gentiles from Tyre and Sidon who want his help? That's outside of his purview. That's beyond the scope of what he can do.

But does the woman give up? No. Instead of just going away, she keeps at it. She kneels down in front of him—the same way the magi kneel by Jesus—and says, "Lord, help me." And here Jesus pivots from an explanation of his mission that was cold but true, to one that just seems unnecessarily harsh. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." If you're the woman, you're probably going to give up and move on at this point. Clearly this isn't going anywhere.

But how does the woman respond? She comes back to Jesus *again*. "Yes, Lord," she says, "Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." And Jesus, very



¹ In Mark's version, she's identified as "a gentile, of Syrophenician origin." "Canaanite" plays up Jewish notions of pagans that were common at the time. Harrington, *Sacra Pagina: Matthew*, 235.

suddenly, relents. He not only backs off his harsh language, but he actually says that her faith is great. He's very impressed by it. And because of her faith, Jesus heals her daughter.

That's what's going on in the text proper. So how would this story have landed in its original context? Well, we know that Matthew's community was primarily but not exclusively Jewish. And relations between Jewish Christians and gentile Christians were often tense and complicated to say the least. We heard an example of that in today's reading from Romans where St. Paul tries to parse out the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in this new community called the church.

This story is doing, in narrative form, what Paul is trying to do in his letter. It's trying to parse out what the relationship is between Jews and Gentiles in this community. It's trying to explain why this community is going to be comprised of both Jews *and* Gentiles. And you can see Matthew emphasizing both God's continuing fidelity to the covenants made to the Jewish people. As well as expanding the horizons of salvation out beyond our inherited borders. So if you're a Jewish believer, what stands out to you is that Jesus affirms God's covenants with the Jewish people. And if you're a gentile believer, you would have noticed how Jesus gives non-Jews like you a place at the table.

Two thousand years later, we don't really have those same type of divisions. So what does this story have to say to us? Well, there's a lot that we can learn from the woman in this story. About faith as persistence and the importance of honesty and maybe even the role of humor. And when this reading comes up again in three years, maybe we can focus just on that.

But the more remarkable change in the story seems to happen to Jesus. That Jesus gains a new understanding of his mission in the world. Before this encounter, Jesus understood his purpose as being sent to Israel. He's here for Jews. Not gentiles. But after this encounter, he sees his mission as broader than it was before. Sure, Israel is going to be the priority for his ministry. But he's been opened up to new possibilities that he didn't see before. Perhaps there is faith and—to use his own image—a harvest outside of Israel, too.

This interpretation of the story makes some people nervous. So they'll try to soften it by saying that the dogs are just puppies. Or that Jesus was actually just testing the woman the whole time. Or maybe he was smiling the whole time. It's difficult to imagine Jesus learning something new because Jesus is God. And isn't God supposed to be all-knowing? Shouldn't Jesus already know exactly what his mission is?

But, as we confess in the Nicene Creed, in the incarnation, God became “truly human.” When we say that Jesus is human, we often take that to mean that he got hungry. He got tired. He drank. He breathed air. And he probably picked up some gray hairs along the way.

These are all true. And they all have something in common, which is that they're all biological. Which is interesting because when we think about what it means to be human, we probably wouldn't think about these kinds of narrow biological categories. After all, you could say this stuff about cats and dogs and houseplants.

But think about the times when you have felt most alive or most human. My guess is that most of us would identify an experience, a relationship, a work of art, that changed our

understanding of who we are and how we exist in the world. We become conscious or aware of something new.²

The idea that Jesus would learn something or gain a new perspective or a new understanding isn't a bug. It's a feature. And it emboldens us to have that same posture of receptivity and openness as we love and serve in God's creation. Our mission and purpose isn't something we impose on the world around us. It's something we're given through the lives and experiences of our neighbors.

There's a ministry in Boston called common cathedral that's a great example of this. It's a ministry that meets every Sunday on Boston Common for worship, fellowship, and service.³ And most of the assembly are people who are living in shelters or on the streets. This ministry began when an Episcopal priest named Debbie Little thought she'd have a worship service outside the subway station on Easter Sunday. Just a one-time thing since it's Easter. And after the service, she was packing up when someone who'd participated in the service approached her and said, "See you next week." Little could have responded, "We're not doing this next week. That's not the plan." But plans change. So Little came back the next Sunday. And so did the people she served. And what started as a one-week experiment has lasted for over twenty-five years.

For Jesus to have his perspective changed is human. And for us to be grafted into God's service is divine. Because it's in those liminal moments that we discover God's mission is bigger than our plans, and God's calling is more profound than our own designs.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

² Spoiler alert and tangent, but you get the same idea at the end of the Barbie movie when she decides to become human. Becoming human isn't about biology but it's about vulnerability, mortality, limits, etc.

³ This anecdote is from Adam Hearlson, *The Holy No: Worship as a Subversive Act* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018). There's lots of stuff about Rev. Little available online that's worth reading.