

Jonah 3:6-4:5
Matthew 15:21-28

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." And he answered, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly. Matt 15:21-28

"But he did not answer her a word"?

Why?

Jesus was silent... when approached by the Canaanite woman. He was silent before Herod (Luke 23:9). He was silent before Pilate (27:14). There are other silences, not written in the lines, but clearly to be traced between the lines – as when he 'looked' on the rich young ruler. There were many occasions when he thus 'looked' – on the crowd when his brothers tried to dissuade him from his mission, on his disciples, on men casting their gifts into the treasury, on Peter after the denial, on the sky as he prayed."

"In silence Jesus searches our hearts, and the silence is then more potent than speech. In silence he watches our world, as once he watched men casting gifts into the treasury – among them a woman bringing "two mites" (Mark 12:42); and his eyes are always upon us. In silence he forgives: the silent look of Jesus broke Peter's heart, and brought redemption. In silence he despairs: what could he say to Herod and Pilate, when the flippancy of one and the brutal powerlust of the other had so corroded them that there was no true metal left on which his words could ring? In silence, as he looked upon the crowd, his flashing eye gave token of the great urgency of what he would next say. With which silence does Jesus look on us?"¹

¹ Buttrick, G. ed. *The Gospel According to St. Matthew. The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol VII. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951).

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Jesus is silently regarding the broader picture. This is Jesus who has just learned of the death of John the Baptist, killed through the duplicity of Herodias and the pride of Herod – John murdered by the regional authority for preaching the truth. This is Jesus who has lately come from feeding five thousand, to the amazement of his closest disciples. You remember the story?

As he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them, and healed their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a lonely place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass; and taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who at were about five thousand men, besides women and children. Matt 14:14-21

This is Jesus who walks out on the water, across the angry sea.

But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out for fear. But immediately he spoke to them, saying, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." Matt 14:26-33

This is Jesus who has just gone toe to toe with the Pharisees, reminding them of the prophesy of Isaiah:

"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men." Matt 15:8-9

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Jesus who will afterwards have to explain to Peter and the rest of the disciples,

“Are you still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and so passes on? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.” Matt 15:16-20

Jesus, now standing at a crossroads in Tyre and Sidon is regarding both the disciples and the Canaanite woman in silence because he sees two demons that must be exorcised: both the demon in the child, an affliction common to the Canaanites because of their worship of heathen gods and loose morals; and the demon of racism in the disciples, cultivated from an embittered history of conflict with a people they regretted not wiping out during the time of the Judges.

Now the angel of the Lord went up from Gilgal to Bochim. And he said, “I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you into the land which I swore to give to your fathers. I said ‘I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed my command. What is this you have done? So now I say, I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become adversaries to you, and their gods shall be a snare to you.” When the angel of the Lord spoke these words to all the people of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept. Judges 2:1-5

These gentile inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon would wage war on the Jews living in the backcountry of Galilee and force them to grow food for the cities, taking most of the harvest for themselves, leaving the Jewish farmers with less than enough for subsistence some years. They would introduce and promote the worship of Baal; engaging in child sacrifice, ritual prostitution, and worse. It would be hard to overstate the animosity, the hatred, shared between the Israelites and Canaanites in Galilee. And it shows through in the words the disciples’ own words.

Consider what the disciples ask for from Jesus in 14:15, the feeding of the five thousand. “When it was evening the disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a lonely place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.’” Notice the main thought of the disciples here. They are concerned for the crowd, they recognize their need and want to help.

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Yet in the following chapter they will address Jesus about the Canaanite woman saying “Send her away, for she is crying after us.” Their motivation is clear. Get her away from us! They are not concerned that she be helped, simply that she be dismissed with authority – and that’s apparently what Jesus gives them isn’t it?

He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” And he answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” Matt 15:24-26

If we regard Jesus’ statement “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” as even more harsh than “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”, so much so as to give us pause, well then congratulations to Jesus. He is giving voice to what the disciples are thinking, what the Jews are thinking. Jesus is finishing the unspoken rest of the sentence from the disciples “send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” Yes, lots of people shout after you all day long, asking for healing and the like, why would this one woman be any different? “Send her away, for she is a gentile and it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the Canaanites – the dogs.” Spoken aloud the thought is particularly ugly. Jesus wants the disciples to recognize that, and for the woman to express her faith in spite of it. In a larger sense she’s already expressed her faith in spite of the disciples’ negative attitude hasn’t she? The Canaanites and the Jews have a long history of animosity. The Canaanites know that the Jews call them dogs. This is the common knowledge that the Canaanite woman has before she even approaches Jesus and the disciples. Even before the dialogue ensues she has had to overcome her self-consciousness over their cultural denigration of her, over their dehumanization of her. But the disciples aren’t going to be able to see that unless they are shocked right out of their habitual perspective.² This profession of faith under duress stands in ironic comparison to Peter’s in 14:28-33,

He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord save me.” Matt 14:29-30

in which the father of the church will not believe in Jesus’ power without an immediate demonstration.

Both the Canaanite woman’s and Peter’s response to Jesus requires a leap of faith. Each are sorely tested in their faith.

How might this look for us?

I immediately think of a personal account by Judith Gundry-Volf, who had an encounter while writing a scholarly article about this Scripture passage. She says:

² Jesus’ teaching in 8:11-12 is really no less provocative, just a different method of delivery.

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One day after having worked on this article (about Jesus and the Canaanite woman), I left my office and was waiting outside for my husband to pick me up. I was standing on the curb at a place where there is a lot of foot traffic. It is a downtown neighborhood, not an upscale one, and people of all descriptions could be seen passing by. Some were well-dressed, others had tattered clothes. There were people of all skin colors, students, business people, children, street people. I don't remember whether I was still thinking about Jesus and the Samaritan woman and the Syrophenician woman. But I saw a man approach me. He was very thin and his clothes were dirty. He looked me in the eye. His eyes were sad, but expectant. He asked me if I had a penny for him. 'I'm a homeless person,' he said. I was feeling nervous. The man had come close and was standing quite near, as near as a good acquaintance would. I had a good lump of cash in my wallet and was concerned about that. I wanted to give him some money, but didn't want to take my eyes off him while searching for it. I couldn't be sure he wouldn't pull out a weapon, or grab my purse and run. When you live in greater Los Angeles such things enter your mind, especially if you are a woman. You hear stories, not just in the newspaper, but from your students, your friends. 'I won't do you no harm,' he assured me. I opened my purse and quickly pulled out some change. I put the coins in his open, thin, black hand. He lifted up his head and looked at me again, still standing close. 'God bless you,' he said. A gust of alcohol blew into my face as he spoke the words. Then he turned away, counting the money as he went. It was over. I was relieved. At that moment the car pulled up to the curb, my husband behind the wheel. I got in and was whisked away to my home on the edge of the city.

The next time I thought about the Samaritan woman and the Syrophenician woman, the man came to my mind. He had come to me asking for just a penny, because he was thirsty, he needed a drink. The demon of his addiction possessed him and made him seek to fulfill its desires. I gave him what he asked for, basically, and just a little bit more. That sent him away. I had felt the barriers between us; he was a black man and I am a white woman; he was a street person, I am an academician; he was poor, I am rich by comparison. The stereotypes came without being invited. This man may be a threat to me; in any case, he is not someone with whom I have anything to do. No boundaries were crossed. No fellowship came about. No living water was tasted. I just gave him some change and he went to buy his liquor. It was not the first bottle, and

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it would not be the last. He would be thirsty again, until he drank the living water welling up like a spring, the water that overflows the barriers. He went off without any miracle of liberation. In fact, it was I who received the blessing from him: 'God bless you,' were his parting words.³

And what is the leap of faith that the Canaanite woman makes? What is it that she says in the face of tremendous backhand slap in Jesus' last remarks?

She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly. Matt 15:27-28

Now consider the woman's faith in contrast with Peter's. What is it that he says in the face of the tremendous waves and wind as he reaches out to Jesus?

But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, "Lord, save me." Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "O man of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. Matt 14:30-32

The woman has great faith while Peter's is little faith by comparison. Her faith is characterized by selflessness, Peter's by fear for self.

Remember the end of Gundry-Volf's story?

I had felt the barriers between us; he was a black man and I am a white woman; he was a street person, I am an academician; he was poor, I am rich by comparison. The stereotypes came without being invited. This man may be a threat to me; in any case, he is not someone with whom I have anything to do. No boundaries were crossed. No fellowship came about. No living water was tasted. I just gave him some change and he went to buy his liquor. It was not the first bottle, and it would not be the last. He would be thirsty again, until he drank the living water welling up like a spring, the water that overflows the barriers. He went off without any miracle of liberation. In fact, it was I who received the blessing from him: 'God bless you,' were his parting words.⁴

³ Gundry-Volf, J. *Spirit, Mercy, and the Other*. *Theology Today*, Vol 51, No. 4, Jan. 1995. Retrieved 1/28/06 from <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jan1995/v51-4-article2.htm>

⁴ *Ibid.*

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Whose faith was characterized by selflessness? Whose by fear for self?

This morning we have the wonderful privilege of celebrating a baptism; of celebrating the expressed faith of parents on behalf of their child; of celebrating our willingness as a community to be responsible for this child as one of our own. We can all get behind that can't we? Who doesn't love a beautiful baby; fresh and gentle and vulnerable and unassuming? Who can resist that face, that stare so full of trust and wonder?

But what about when this child grows? What about when this child becomes a teenager? What about when this child may transform under your very eyes, from a sweet innocent into a Canaanite? Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, mentors, what then? Will you still be so quick to love and minister to him then, when his ways are not your ways, his music is not your music, his dress is not your dress, his language is not your language?

And it's not just our kids is it? Who are the Canaanites in your lives? Who are those folks who you come in contact with who are begging for the good news of the gospel, but well, you can't imagine reaching out to? Why? Because they're unclean? Because you don't have anything in common with them? Because...well, there's probably a whole raft of because reasons we can come up with. So will our faith response be characterized by selflessness or fear for self? Will we commit to pray for them, to minister to them, to witness to them in the manner of Jesus? Or are the waves and the wind too daunting for us?

"It shall be as you desire." The woman's faith is rewarded. Not only that, but Jesus goes on to minister, to preach to the gentiles of Tyre and Sidon with great effect.

And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the dumb, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, so that the throng wondered, when they saw the dumb speaking, the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel. Matt 15:30-31

We have a chance this morning and every morning to answer Jesus' call upon our lives by ministering to those around us, even those not like us. What are the words, the actions that will come from your heart? How will you answer?