

A Tough Teaching

Matthew 15:21-28

We can't always see the truth, until we do.

A sermon preached by
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Learning new things is sometimes a challenge. John Ortberg has a favorite story about a guy taking a college class in ornithology, the study of birds. The teacher had a reputation for being extremely difficult and a little eccentric, so this guy studied his brains out for the final. He went to class feeling prepared, but instead of having a normal test, there were 25 pictures on the wall of birds' feet. He was supposed to identify the birds by their feet. That was the entire exam! The guy went nuts; he said to the teacher, "This is crazy. Nobody could take this test." The teacher said, "Nevertheless, you have to take it." The kid said, "I'm not going to take it." The teacher said, "You have to take it, or you fail." The kid said, "Go ahead and fail me. I'm not going to take this test." The teacher said, "All right. That's fine. You fail. Tell me your name." The kid rolled his pants up to his knees and said, "You tell me."¹

Learning is a challenge. It seems like there's always a test of some sort involved, even if you're out of school. This Scripture text today, suggested by the lectionary, is a challenge. It's such a challenge, I haven't preached on it in 39 years, since the first year after I graduated seminary. (Of course, I pretty much knew everything back then.) I think I have avoided this text because it is so difficult. This just doesn't seem like the kind, merciful, open-hearted, open-minded Jesus I prefer. Was he really prejudiced against the Canaanites? Did he really call this woman a dog for wanting her daughter healed? Did he get up on the wrong side of the pallet that day? What's going on?

It's helpful to remember that Jesus was a master teacher. Great teachers do not just impart information; they change lives. They do more than pass on knowledge; they create unforgettable experiences so that the knowledge becomes part of the student. Great teachers are able to teach a group of people even though the individuals in that group are at different levels of knowledge and experience. Sometimes great teachers do this by using what the scholar Walter Wink called "deliberately induced frustration." That when a teacher says something that requires a student to confront a paradox or an impossible task—like to understand a parable or feed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish. Through that frustration, the student learns a valuable and unforgettable lesson.

I think what we have going on in the story of the Canaanite woman is a tough teaching from the Master Rabbi Jesus. The Son of God knew this woman before he even met her. He knew the outcome of the conversation before it happened. He gave a teaching, and it became a test, both for the woman and for the disciples. One of them passed with flying colors.

This journey of Jesus is the only trip he made outside of Jewish territory. Tyre and Sidon were on the Mediterranean coast, northwest of Galilee. They were diverse in population, although there were Jews living in the area. But mostly it was a land of enemies and infidels. Jesus was getting away to get some rest from the pressure of the Pharisees and the crowds of sick people. So who shows up but a Canaanite woman begging for help for her demon-possessed daughter? Canaanites were despised by Jews, like Samaritans were, but for different reasons. Nevertheless, she addressed Jesus with terms of respect: “Lord” and “Son of David.” Apparently she was acquainted with Jewish beliefs.

Judaism fan or not, Jesus initially just ignored her. Maybe he was waiting to see how the disciples were going to respond. They wanted nothing to do with her, so they begged Jesus to send her away. Then Jesus began to deliberately induce frustration into the conversation. He couldn’t do anything, because he was sent only to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” What was the woman to do? She came to Jesus in a posture of worship—on her knees—and begged him, “Lord, help me!” Facing her insistence, and knowing that she was not going to disengage easily, Jesus turned the tension up a notch: “*It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.*”² This is where we start thinking, “Who are you and what did you do with my Jesus?” He is being so rude—or is he? “Dogs” was the term used by Jews for anybody who was an outsider—Samaritans, Greeks, Romans, or Canaanites. But the word Jesus used here is a diminutive, a term that means more like pets, not like a pack of scavenging mongrels, which was the usual sense. He was softening the image; think puppies. Still, it sounded a little harsh.

What was it about this woman? How could Jesus be sure he wasn’t just going to send her away in tears? Remember, he knew her before they met. He knew she had an intense love for her daughter, and she was not about to give up hope for a healing. Second, she obviously had some relationship with faith, because she knelt and used terms of respect for Jesus. Third, she was persistent. Like the widow in the story Jesus told in Luke 18, she was going to pound on the door until she got what she came for.³ And finally, she had a sense of humor. Maybe there was something in the tone of Jesus’ voice that let her know he was just poking at her to try to make a point.⁴

It was out of this sense of humor that she answered the deliberately frustrating words of Jesus: “*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.*”⁵ Yes, Lord, the Jews come first, but can’t we Canaanites get a little bit of grace on the side? And just like that, she passed the test. She learned the lesson Jesus was teaching, and her reward was immediate: “*Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.*”⁶ The woman’s daughter was healed. Jesus could see, deep down in her heart, that she wasn’t just giving lip service to some Jewish words she had heard. The woman had significant faith, and she deserved his help.

The disciples were still standing around scratching their heads. They were still in the school of discipleship, learning how to overcome the shared prejudices of their people. But they came around. Jesus wasn’t through with them. Before it was all over, they were

taking the story of Jesus to Gentile dogs across the Roman Empire. That's why they remembered this teaching and included it in their Gospel.

What can we learn from this challenging story today?

First, barriers can be crossed. Boundaries are porous. Prejudice can be unlearned. Hatred can be resisted. I think Jesus did consider his primary mission to the Jews, but he also affirmed faith wherever he saw it. The Canaanite woman, despite her background, had faith. Jesus recognized it when he saw it.

The only other Gentile he encountered in the gospel prior to the passion narrative was a Roman centurion who came to Jesus seeking help for his ailing servant. Jesus started to go to the servant, but the centurion told him just to say the word, and the servant would be healed. Jesus said, "*Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.*"⁷

There are no barriers with Jesus. He loves everyone and accepts anyone who approaches him with faith. That is a lesson most of us have yet to learn. It seems like as a culture we are building more walls than ever—divisions over politics, race, gender, sexual identity, class, wealth, education, you name it, it can separate us. If anyone should be a force for unity in this polarized world, it should be people of faith. Love, grace, peace, joy, and humility know no boundaries. God has no boundaries; why do we want to shut people out?

This week is the 60th anniversary of the civil rights March on Washington and Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. His vision of the beloved community is still calling us forward. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1964, King said, "I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality...I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word."⁸ Someday we will all learn this lesson.

Second, a mind can be changed. The truth you know now may not be the truth you end up with. We might—heaven forbid—be wrong! If we are open to the world around us, and if we pay attention, listening to what others are saying, we might learn something, and new ideas can change our mind. In the Old Testament, even God changed the divine mind when someone like Abraham or Moses presented a better alternative. Jesus apparently changed his mind about the Canaanite woman; she went from "dog" to "great" in a second. The disciples changed their minds about who could come to Jesus. Children, Canaanite women, Samaritans, lepers, prostitutes—he welcomed them all. They had to broaden their view.

Carl Sandburg, in his book *Lincoln: The War Years*, tells about a Colonel Scott who requested a leave to attend the funeral of his wife who accidentally drowned. But in the middle of a war, President Lincoln refused the request. Early the next morning Lincoln came to Scott's hotel room and admitted to the amazed officer, "I have had a regretful night and come now to beg your forgiveness." Then Lincoln took the officer in his own carriage to the steamship and sent him on his way to the funeral.⁹

I think back over 42 years of ministry, how many mistakes I made, how many times I was wrong, how many times I was just stubborn. I've learned a great deal, and I'm still learning. I'm still trying to unravel some of the patterns of my upbringing and early years. It has taken time, and an intentional openness to differences, and lots of study and reflection. But in many ways, I have come to understand a better truth, and when I changed my mind, I found grace and healing. Changing your mind doesn't mean you're weak. It's

a mark of humility, a mark of maturity, and evidence of faith that believes God is always leading us on a better way to a better place.

Finally, we learn from Jesus and the Canaanite woman that faith can overcome anything. Oddly enough, the person with faith in this story is someone who was outside the religious establishment. She was a woman, a foreigner, and probably some sort of pagan, though she knew the Jewish words. Nevertheless, she believed, and because she believed, she persisted. She used her wits, and she finally achieved her goal. Her daughter was made well. Faith empowers all the qualities we need to reach our goals: dedication, determination, perseverance, endurance. These are what it takes to be successful. It probably won't happen overnight, but when you confront an obstacle, exercise your faith, and you will overcome.

One of the great figures of Christian history is St. Augustine. He was the last of the great Church Fathers, and influenced the development of Christian theology. Though he died nearly 1600 years ago, his books, particularly his autobiography, *The Confessions*, and his greatest philosophical work, *The City of God*, are still read today. But Augustine never would have become a Christian if it had not been for his mother's faith. His mother was named Monica, and she was a saint on her own. Many of us can say that about our mothers, but Monica had a tougher row to hoe than most. As a young man, Augustine went away to school and became a believer in a non-Christian religion. Then he dabbled in Greek philosophy. All the while he was leading a wild life of excess and immorality.

Monica devoted her whole life to praying for Augustine's conversion. When he came home espousing devotion to a pagan religion, Monica went to the local bishop and begged him to talk sense into her son. The bishop refused, probably because Augustine was already famous for his intellect. But he assured Monica that he, the bishop, had been wayward in his youth and had come around. When Monica began to weep, the bishop sent her away with these words: "Go! Live on as you are living. It is not possible that the son of such tears should be lost."

The bishop was right. After many years and a fierce inner struggle, Augustine was finally touched by a revelation in Scripture and became a Christian. When Monica learned of his conversion, she remarked that she had nothing left to live for, because the greatest desire of her heart had been fulfilled. Nine days later, Monica died. The son she gave her life praying for went on to change the course of history.¹⁰

The story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman is a challenging text. But I believe it gives us some good challenges for our faith.

One, don't be so quick to judge. Those barriers that you think are so important can be crossed. Every single person is created by God with dignity and worth.

Two, don't assume that your truth today is your truth forever. You could be wrong. Stay open to what God might reveal to you, and don't be surprised if you end up at a different place than you are now. You could change your mind.

Three, don't give up. Persist in difficulty; persevere through trials; endure hardship. Keep the faith, because it's the only thing that will get you where you want to go.

And four, along the way, don't lose your sense of humor.

Despite his "deliberately induced frustration," the grace and love of Jesus will ultimately bring you peace and hope. Learn your lessons well, and when the test comes, you will pass with flying colors.

¹John Ortberg, "Passing the Test," Preaching Today Tape #228. www.PreachingTodaySermons.com.

² Matthew 15:26.

³ Luke 18:1-8.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2, Revised Edition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 122-124.

⁵ Matthew 15:27.

⁶ Matthew 15:28.

⁷ Matthew 8:5-13.

⁸ <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1964/king/acceptance-speech/>.

⁹ John R. Brokhoff, *Jesus ... Who?* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing Co., Inc., 1977).

¹⁰ King Duncan, "When You Need Help," adapted from Ruth Bell Graham, *Prodigals and Those Who Love Them*, www.Sermons.com.