

If ever there were a reason to know the context of a story, it's today's scripture. And even knowing some of the context doesn't always mean we're left with all the answers to our questions. Today's scripture reading involves two stories and though they seem unrelated, they may have more in common than it first seems. However, the second story can often be viewed for some as troubling and uncomfortable while for others it may seem extraordinary and liberating. It takes place on the margins where the boundaries of geography, ethnicity, religion and gender are crossed. This story reminds us how messy life can be and that not everything is tied up neatly with a bow and a three point sermon. So let's dive in. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus is debating with the Pharisees, a group of powerful Jews who held to the oral traditions/law passed down from Moses, as well as the written law. Jesus also was debating with the scribes, legal experts, regarding what are faithful and acceptable practices in religious life. Tensions rise as the Pharisees and scribes throw the disciples under the bus for not washing their hands before they eat, which breaks the tradition of dietary and temple laws. "These dietary laws placed a high premium on the purity of the individual, and in today's passage, Jesus is turning expectations on their head" (*Feasting on the Word*, Dock Hollingsworth). Before we read this morning's scripture, let us first pray for the illumination of the Holy Spirit. **[PRAY]**. Listen to a Word from God from the Gospel of Matthew 15:10-28. I'm reading from the New Revised Standard Version translation. **[READ]**.

This debate about what or who is clean or unclean in the eyes of God has now led Jesus to call a crowd together. There is obviously a difference of interpretation and opinion between some temple leaders and Jesus. Jesus

doesn't mince his words, as he declares those in the debate blind and unreliable guides who are not sanctioned by God. "Jesus accuses them of majoring on minor matters such as hand-washing while ignoring disruptive societal practices such as murder, theft, and slander" (*New Testament Fortress Commentary*, Warren Carter). God knows what is pure. God knows the intentions of the heart.

The scene shifts suddenly as we move into the second story and into a different location. Jesus traveled to the district of Tyre and Sidon, a majorly Gentile area- foreign territory. Keep in mind Jews and Gentiles didn't really mix. The Israelites saw Gentiles as pagans...as unclean. We don't know how soon into their arrival there or from where...but a Canaanite woman- a local- came towards them shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon" (v. 22). And we're told that Jesus did not answer her at all. Nada. Nothing. Crickets. Then, in the midst of the awkward silence, the disciples butted in urging Jesus to send her away because she was too loud (v. 23b). Jesus answers her, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (v. 24). This wasn't the first time Jesus had referenced this in Matthew's Gospel (10:6). But this tenacious woman didn't take no for an answer, and she came and knelt before Jesus begging him for help- much like Peter did in last week's story. Jesus doesn't help. Instead, he "answers her with words that cut no matter how we try and soften them" (journeywithjesus.org, Debie Thomas). He says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (v. 26). Really, Jesus? A dog? Are there ways around this most disturbing moment? Maybe. We could spend weeks delving into the various interpretations provided by scholars as to why Jesus may have reacted the way he did, but the truth is we

simply don't know because we aren't told. There is as much ambiguity going on here as there are explanations for Jesus' behavior. Maybe Jesus was irritated with the disciples' attitudes regarding women and Gentiles so "Jesus decides to use this occasion as a test to help her and to challenge the deeply rooted prejudices in the hearts of his disciples" (*Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, Kenneth Bailey)? Or "maybe Jesus is simply describing the reality of his mission: the healing he offers is for the children of Israel first" (Debie Thomas)? Or Maybe Jesus is just tired and wanted a break from the relentless demands of ministry and/or is blinded by his own prejudices? After all, we sometimes forget that Jesus is both fully human AND fully divine.

But regardless of why Jesus did what he did, I want to explore the role of the Canaanite woman in this story. "While Jesus' response bears attention, what is often bypassed is the acknowledgment of the woman's great faith" (Brooks). This faithful woman did a really hard thing. She refused to keep silent any longer. She was relentless in her attempts to ask for mercy from Jesus. Here in Matthew's account, this unnamed woman is not only a Gentile but a Canaanite. Canaanites were traditional enemies of the Israelites and yet, at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel in the genealogy of Jesus, the writer goes out of his way to mention two female Canaanite ancestors of Jesus: Tamar and Rahab, as well as other Gentile women in Jesus' family tree: including Ruth. It's as if the Gospel writer was foreshadowing- throughout this Gospel and particularly in this story- the conversion of the Gentiles. Although we aren't told exactly when, Jesus' mission eventually opens wider to include Gentiles into the faith. At the end

of Matthew's Gospel, the risen Jesus commissions his disciples to make disciples of all nations (28).

This Canaanite woman seems to have some prior knowledge of Jesus and his ministry, and she is a desperate mother on a mission for mercy for her daughter and herself. And in her resilience, she crosses all sorts of boundaries. Her daughter needs help, and she isn't afraid to make a scene. She approaches and addresses Jesus and at least twelve of his male disciples in public, which was a huge taboo. Women weren't to address men in the privacy of their own homes, let alone in public. She is the very personification of what the Pharisees, scribes and probably even the disciples would think of as unclean. Despite the hurdles that she faces, she persists and boldly stays in the ring so to speak, addressing Jesus four times, even amidst what seems to be rejection. She asks him to have mercy on her, calling him "Lord," and following it up with "Son of David"- a messianic title. For a Gentile woman to use this combination of titles with Jesus, an itinerant Jewish teacher, is quite unexpected.

After Jesus calls her a dog, the woman, unwilling to be dismissed, even by God, is "aware of her location and the limitations placed on her. She does not succumb to them but brings them into the light and calls them into question: 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table'" (*Christian Century*, Karoline Lewis, 2008). Notice the word "Master" in reference to the table. She doesn't seem to need a seat AT the table, as for her, the crumbs will be sufficient. She doesn't object to God's having mercy on the chosen people. It's as if she trusts that even the crumbs that fall on the floor from Christ's table will be enough. She doesn't seem to

believe that there are limits to God's mercy. In that one sentence, she embodies and emboldens faith lived out. Faith lived out in love. Hers is a "brilliant response, not least because it cuts to the very heart of Jesus' boundary-breaking, taboo-busting, division-destroying ministry of table fellowship. After all, he's the Messiah who eats with tax collectors and prostitutes. He's the rabbi who breaks bread with sinners. His disciples are the ones who earn the Pharisees' contempt for eating with unwashed hands" (Debie Thomas). No wonder Jesus commends her great faith! Bested by this witty, truth speaking woman, and bested he is, everyone agrees on this, Jesus kindly responds, "Let it be done for you as you wish" (v. 28), and by his words alone, we're told her daughter was healed instantly. Jesus has already demonstrated in previous stories in Matthew that he is willing to embrace those whom society rejects (8:1-4, 28-34, 9:20-22). And "this encounter with the Canaanite woman, an outsider in every sense, is another marker in the great story of God's redemptive plan for the world. Her story is not simply about one woman's struggle to be heard; it is the struggle of all people to be seen, and heard, and experience fully God's redemptive love" (*Connections*, Gennifer Benjamin Brooks). Purity and faithfulness are shown ultimately by how we live out the radical hospitality and love of Jesus Christ.

Mr. Rogers once said, "We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It's easy to say 'It's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem.' Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes." We must take a deep look at ourselves and prayerfully ask if we are willing to be faithful and persistent like the Canaanite woman, advocating for those who need help and/or have no voice.

“That kind of relentless faith-work is what we need to summon in this season of racial reckoning and pandemic devastation” (*Presbyterian Outlook*, Jill Duffield). Will we as Christ’s disciples be a voice from the margins? A voice that says that there are no second class citizens in the kingdom of God; everyone is a child of God. A voice that denounces violence, hatred, and idolatry. A voice that decries discrimination and mass incarceration. “A voice that rejects supremacy and power wielded against the poor and the oppressed” (workingpreacher.org, Karoline Lewis, 2017)? Friends, God calls us to be agents of peace, justice and reconciliation in our world- despite the barriers that can divide us. Scripture tells us that God’s mercy is from everlasting to everlasting (Ps. 103:17); it never ends and is new every morning (Lam. 3:22-23). And because God calls and equips us...we, too, can do these hard things. May God grant us the great faith and courage of the Canaanite woman so that we will persist in advocating for the vulnerable and hurting no matter how long it takes for our world to be made well. Amen.