

the man of Nazareth

Matthew 15:21-28

March 12, 2017

I am not the same person I was 22 1/2 years ago. Are you? I'm not the same minister I was 22 1/2 years ago. I have changed, significantly, since I have been here among you. I don't think in the same way. I don't feel in the same way. I don't do things in the same way. My preaching is not the same. My theology is not entirely the same. My values are not entirely the same.

Is that a sign of weakness? Is it a sign of weakness that I have changed? That my values and perspectives and methods have evolved? I think I am wiser now, happier now, surer now, more grace-full now, but does that mean I was "wrong" before? Or does it mean I am "wrong" now because I have changed, because I have left behind some of the convictions and certainties of my youth?

Or is it simply a natural and normal and appropriate aspect of being human -- learning and changing and growing and becoming? To be human is to be becoming. And when we stop becoming, we start dying.

in Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth

The man of Nazareth. The man. The male human being born from Mary's womb. The Jewish boy who grew into manhood in the town of Nazareth, a small town in northern Israel about fifteen or twenty miles from Lake Galilee. I've been there. Some of you have been there. Jesus, not an uncommon name. Jesus, the man of Nazareth. One of us.

One of us. It matters! It is an essential tenet of our faith that Jesus is one of us, not just "like us," but one of us, human, fully human. If Jesus is not one of us, what good is he to us? If Jesus is not fully human, how could we hope to go where he goes or do what he does or be like him or be with him, really be with him? It is Jesus' humanity that makes him approachable. It is Jesus' humanity that makes God approachable. And it is Jesus' obedience, his obedience to God as a human being, that saves us, that lifts up and dignifies and glorifies our humanity itself.

Jesus left that place and went off to the territory near the cities of Tyre and Sidon ...

Why go to Tyre and Sidon? Why head off to these two coastal cities on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea in Syria? John the Baptist had just died, beheaded by Herod. Shortly thereafter, Jesus withdrew seeking some quiet time by himself, but he was found out by crowds of people coming to seek his help. They came into the wilderness, with no food, and he had pity on them. He healed them and he fed them, five thousand of them, and that doesn't count the women and children.

After that, he went to Gennesaret by the lake and they found him there too. They brought to him sick people from all the surrounding towns begging him to heal them.

And then some Pharisees came, challenging, attacking, protesting, debating and he said to the crowds, "It is not what goes into your mouth that makes you unclean; rather, what comes out of it" and his disciples warned him, "Do you know you hurt the Pharisees' feelings by what you said?"

Why go to Tyre and Sidon? Maybe he wanted to get away, get out of town, get out of Israel. Maybe he just needed a quiet seaside retreat, where nobody would know him, where nobody would need him. But even there, someone found him.

A Canaanite woman who lived in that region came to him. "Son of David!" she cried. "Have mercy on me, sir! My daughter has a demon and is in terrible shape."

A Canaanite woman. A Canaanite. Woman.

Jesus and his disciples are in the region of Tyre and Sidon. That's where Jezebel was from, the Jezebel who married Ahab and threatened Elijah and single-handedly did so much to undermine the worship of Yahweh in Israel. So this is Jezebel's daughter? Or maybe that's not fair. But she is not a Jew and she is not coming to Jesus to learn about his religion. She is coming to Jesus for her daughter.

"Son of David," she called him. She knows who he is. She knows where he has come from. She has undoubtedly heard of what he has been doing.

"Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter, my daughter ..."

She comes to Jesus not as a religious seeker, but as a distraught mother.

But Jesus did not say a word to her ...

She begs. He doesn't say a word. Is he spent, exhausted, can't be bothered? But he has interrupted his retreats before to help, to heal, to listen. Is this not the right time, the right place ... the right person?

His disciples do have something to say.

Send her away! She won't stop following us and she is making such a fuss!

It seems, from the disciples outcry, that she didn't just ask Jesus once. She has been begging, crying, pleading -- incessantly! So to satisfy his disciples and to give her an answer, Jesus finally does speak.

I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel ...

Only to the people of Israel. He doesn't expressly tell her to go away. He just states the facts, the facts as he knows them. This is his mission. This is his calling as he understands it. He, a Jew, has been sent by God to the Jews, to revive them, to restore them, to bring them back, to bring them home, to bring them home to God.

How long they have wandered. How far they have strayed. How long they have been lost. God wants to bring them home, to save them once more, so Jesus comes seeking and saving the lost. Jesus comes proclaiming God's message: "The kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins. Turn to God!"

That's his answer, but she is not finished. She is not ready to give up. She is not prepared to take "No" for an answer! She came to him and fell at his feet and cried: "Help me, sir!"

Hmmm ... Things are getting a bit dicey, wouldn't you say?

It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs ...

Oh, my ... What are you going to do with that? Will you try to find some way of explaining this away, of clarifying what Jesus "really means?" Many have tried. Without success! Or will you use this to try to explain Jesus away, to prove he is not what or whom he seems to be? But that would be unfair, using this single comeback to a Canaanite woman to discredit an entire ministry, to disregard an entire life.

Why can't we just take it at face value? Jesus is one of us, a human being, the man of Nazareth, for God's sake. Yes, for God's sake! He is a Jew, a believing Jew, a dedicated Jew, from Nazareth, and undoubtedly, at this point in his life and ministry, as we might expect, he shares the perspective of Jews in Nazareth: that Canaanites are not Jews, that they are not among Abraham's children, they are not God's chosen ones, not people of the book, people of the law, children of the covenant. Canaanites are outsiders, foreigners -- pagans -- not those to whom Jesus has been sent.

But she is not finished! She is not ready to give up. She is not ready to take "No" for an answer! Up to now, she has been begging, crying, pleading, but now she collects herself and she answers Jesus in a calm, measured tone.

You're right, sir, but even the dogs eat the leftovers that fall from their masters' table ...

Which being translated means: "Just give me a crumb!"

And the rest is history. Literally, the rest is history, because Jesus is stunned, brought up short, literally enlightened by her answer: "You are a woman of great faith!" Maybe, just maybe, at that time and in that place, a greater faith than his.

She teaches the teacher. She got what she came for -- her daughter was healed. But because of her, many more daughters like hers would too be healed. Because she changed Jesus' perspective. She enlarged Jesus' understanding of his mission. She made clearer Jesus' understanding of God's mission. A mother's love for her child helped Jesus see a Father's love for his children, for all his children.

Jesus changed. Jesus grew. Jesus became. Does that make him weaker, less a Son of God, less a Savior? Or does that make him human, one of us, all the more able to be our Savior, because he did change, because he did grow, because he did become the Son of God he was ... in obedience, in faithfulness, in keeping his own eyes and own ears open to the God who is still speaking?

God is still speaking. Sometimes through the voice of a Canaanite woman. And if Jesus can change, if Jesus can learn, if Jesus can become ... so can we!