

Matthew 15:21-28

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

What a strange Gospel text. Somehow, I made it all the way through Sunday School without hearing this story. I can see why my Sunday School teachers avoided it.... I had many questions about this text, I mean what is going on here? And what on earth does it have to do with us?

Let's start with the woman. She is clearly in deep emotional distress because her daughter is sick with a demon. She is crying out. The Greek here indicates that she is loudly vocalizing the pain and fear that is consuming her. Before we go any further, I want us to sit with this woman in her reality. Her daughter is sick, she has nowhere to turn. She's crying out for help and the disciples are telling her to be quiet. My guess is that at some point in our lives we have felt like this Canaanite woman. I don't know all of your grief or areas of life that bring you pain, but we all have them and carry them. The death of a loved one can cause us to cry out like the Canaanite woman. Dealing with our own chronic illness can feel as overwhelming as the Canaanite woman's situation. And beyond the personal, the past few months in the United States have revealed the voices of people of color, crying out like the Canaanite woman, and feeling like they have not been heard. We know what these feelings are like. We want God to intervene.

Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, the disciples seem to frequently miss the point. So we might not find their response surprising, but why would Jesus refuse to help this woman who is clearly in emotional distress? Jesus tells her, and the disciples who are listening in, that his primary mission is to the people of Israel. Now, this feels a little uncomfortable for us because isn't Jesus for everybody? Well, yes. But Jesus comes specifically to Israel to fulfill the covenant promises that God has made to Abraham, to Moses, to David, and to all of the people of Israel. This will fulfill God's promise to bless and redeem the world through them. Jesus had to start with the people of Israel, or else all the promises God had made would be meaningless. And as the preceding chapters in Matthew show, there is more than enough work for Jesus to do just focusing on the people of Israel. There is quite a bit more that we could unpack here, but I want to keep this sermon to a manageable length. So if you have questions, want to talk more about covenants, the role of Israel and why Jesus was focused on them, let me know. I'd enjoy a Zoom or phone coffee where we can delve into all of that in more detail.

But what I want to you to take away from all of that is that the promise was that the messiah would be for the people of Israel, and the mission would expand outward from there. Our passage in Isaiah is actually all about how different types of people will be welcome in God's future kingdom—even those who were considered the most unclean or the most far-off. God goes and brings them into the Kingdom. This radical inclusion was always a part of God's plan; through the people of Israel, the rest of the nations would come to know God. That is why Jesus is so committed to his mission being to the people of Israel—because through his specific, focused mission God will redeem and reconcile all of creation.

But the problem is that this kingdom-future, where all are welcome and included, keeps breaking into Jesus' and the disciples' present. A centurion, a Roman soldier, shows up asking Jesus to heal his servant. Jesus not only heals the centurion's servant but affirms his great faith. There is the Samaritan woman at the well, who despite a sinful past and being the wrong ethnicity ends up being an evangelist to her whole town. The promise of God's love and mercy extended to the whole world simply cannot be contained—even before Jesus has given the command to the disciples to go and preach and baptize in all the nations.

And so, for us, we can take Jesus' words to heart. This promise of God's mercy, love, and justice extended to all people really means all. It meant all for the Canaanite woman and the Roman centurion and it even means all today. God reaches out for you, for me, for your neighbor, who doesn't look like you, speak the same language as you, vote like you do, or even read the Bible the same way as you. In the midst of our brokenness, idolatry, and sinfulness, God extends grace to everyone. The things that create barriers between us and others in society....gone. God's grace is extended to every single person, just as they are—that's the whole point.

And when you read our Gospel text in conjunction with our text from Isaiah you might notice something else. God is the primary actor. God doesn't just hang a sign on the door saying all are welcome and then sit back. Rather, Isaiah says that God gathers all people in. God will bring them to God's holy mountain, God will accept their sacrifices and bring them joy. And in the last line in that particular passage of Isaiah God promises to keep bringing people in. Siblings in Christ, I hope this makes your spirit rejoice. God is constantly gathering us together and bringing us in. God names us, claims us, blesses us, and goes out into the world to find more people. This is radical love and invitation for beyond platitudes.

And so as God's people are we willing to do the same? Saying all are welcome is one thing, but are we really prepared to extend the same radical welcome and grace that God does? The in-breaking of the kingdom in our Gospel reading and God's action in Isaiah invite us to be people that seek out the marginalized and create space for them at the center. God's action on our behalf invites us to listen to stories and voices of people that are different than our own and to make space for them in our heart and in our community. God's expansive welcome isn't limited by people's gender, ethnicity, or sinful past, and ours shouldn't be either.

Our passages for today invite us to consider the broadness of God's heart and God's kingdom. Showing great faith might mean trusting that God's grace and love are extended to people who don't vote like we do, to people of color who are woefully underrepresented in our church pews and in our church leadership, and even to people who don't read Scripture the same ways we do. What is more is that we are never called to do this work alone. Bringing to fulfillment God's promises of grace and love extended to all was Jesus' work. We do not attempt these things on our own. We do it together, we do it in the name of Jesus, and we do it in the certain hope that God will complete what God has started.