

Sermon Aug 16 2020
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Grace, Mercy and Peace from God and from our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

I'm going to start today's sermon with a bold claim. Canaanite Lives Matter! Canaanite lives?! Yes, that's what I said. What's a Canaanite, you ask? Well, that's how Matthew identifies the woman who comes up to Jesus in today's Gospel lesson. And this Canaanite woman has a particular problem, which is, how do you get someone to stop and consider your perspective on things when that person doesn't want to? How do you get someone to recognize that there's a problem when that person doesn't want to recognize there's a problem? And even more to the point, how do you get someone with power to use that power to help you? This is the challenge faced by the Canaanite woman. She confronted Jesus with a very specific need, and at first, he dismissed her. She persisted, and he then changed his mind and acknowledged her claim.

Now, I must add that when I say "Canaanite Lives Matter," I am not making fun of the Black Lives matter movement. On the contrary, I want to know what this Gospel lesson can teach us about how to respond to the claim that, indeed, black lives matter. But to get to this point, and then learn from it, will require us to sift through the details of the story and our reactions to it. This incident as it is reported in Matthew reveals Jesus in a light that is offensive to most sensibilities. Jesus suggests that this Canaanite woman who approaches him is a dog. Wow. And he uses the term after highlighting his own religious identity. Are we to understand that Jesus has just been a chauvinist brat to this woman? Isn't he being racist? How could the king of compassion, who in the previous chapter of the Gospel, has just interrupted his own plans in order to heal and feed over 5000 people in the wilderness, how does he now turn to this one woman who is begging for help, and refuse her just because she is not Jewish?

This sin of religious and ethnic chauvinism haunts Matthew's version of this story, and should be particularly offensive to non-Jewish Christians, since the possibility of our entry into the salvation history of the God of Israel only came about in the early church by opening up that salvation movement to non-Jews. Had such a

chauvinistic view actually prevailed in Matthew's generation of Christians, Gentiles may never have entered the church, and you and I would not be Christian. But before Jesus gets tarred with that sin, we need to see why the issue comes up in Matthew's Gospel, and then what Matthew's Jesus does about it.

Matthew takes this story from the Gospel of Mark, but we know that he changes it a bit from Mark's version. This story doesn't appear in Luke's gospel at all. Scholars believe that Matthew changed Mark's version to address the debate of non-Jews in the Jesus movement that I just mentioned.

Matthew adds elements to Mark's version that recall traditional Jewish language and theological concepts in order to echo the exclusive concerns of the Jewish-only party in his church. Thus, whereas in Mark's version, the woman is just identified as a "Greek", in Matthew, she is changed into a Canaanite woman. To traditional Jews, the word "Canaanite" is a loaded term. It refers to the group of tribes who in various ways vexed the ancient Israelites as they struggled to take over the land God promised to them in the covenant with their patriarch Abraham. But that was over a thousand years earlier. By the time of Jesus, there were no Canaanites left.

In Mark's version, Jesus rejects the woman's claim, but Matthew changes it to make it seem a harsher rejection. In Mark's version, Jesus tells her to wait, using the metaphor that the children, read Jewish people, should be fed dinner before the scraps are given to the dogs, read non-Jews. In Matthew's version, Jesus totally ignores the woman at first. She keeps up her pleading, and then the disciples beg Jesus to send her away. He responds with another zinger that is sure to please the Jewish-only party in Matthew's church. Jesus says that he was sent "only" to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. This statement expresses an earlier, more strict Jewish Christian point of view, that Jesus's mission is confined to the people of Israel alone. Let the Gentiles fend for themselves. In Matthew's version, there is nothing the woman should expect from Jesus. Jesus and his mission will be moving on now, thank you very much.

At this point, it sounds like Jesus is done with this woman, but this woman is not done with Jesus. She decides to play with Jesus' own metaphor, and throws it back in his court. Matthew adds the word "master" to her retort, which makes

her seem more submissive to Jesus than in Mark's version. In essence, she says, "ok, call me a dog, but even the dogs wait at the Master's table."

By this point in the story, and especially to our ears, the damage has already been done. Especially in Matthew's version, Jesus stands on some point of principle and refuses to help her.

To Americans in the 21st century, it's pretty cold-hearted, and strikes our ears as chauvinistic. Yes, we would even call it racist, since he rejects her petition on the basis of her identity as a non-Jew. And all this effort to understand why it's so offensive just reveals even more to us how this fight in Matthew's church is not our fight anymore. Also, her submission to Jesus makes us uncomfortable. Can't we just cover our eyes and move on?

Well, no, we can't just skip this story, because my main point is that she has basically said to Jesus, Canaanite lives matter.

You have to look at the dynamics of power in the story to appreciate how she has advocated for herself. The woman and her daughter are suffering because the daughter is possessed by demon. They don't have the power to change the situation; they can't get rid of the demon that torments her daughter. But here comes someone who actually has the power to change the situation, and the woman recognizes that. Jesus, who is actually the most powerful person in the story, refuses to help her because she is not the right kind of person. It takes an extra effort on her part to convince him that, in this case, Canaanite lives matter.

Now, I hope you will follow me as I seek to apply what we learn from this woman to a similar claim in our own time, a claim made by vulnerable people to those with the power to change the situation. Many Christians see that this is the dynamic at work in the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. Put bluntly, the Black Lives Matter claim is an appeal to the surrounding society, but especially to white people, to recognize Black Americans' claims for greater justice. Now a caveat should be added here. You may have heard about certain Black Lives Matter activists or protesters making statements or calling for policy changes that you disagree with. I recognize that there are some Black Lives Matter leaders and activists who make problematic claims, claims that many other people reject, but we should understand that it is a de-centralized movement, with no central leadership or main spokesperson. It is very diverse, and there are many different

points of view represented within the movement. I'm speaking about the basic motivation of the movement. Black Lives Matter is a movement that protests against incidents of police brutality and all racially-motivated violence against Black people. And it is making an appeal for change in our society.

Now one response to Black Lives Matter is simply to reject it. That would be in line with Jesus' response to the Canaanite woman in the Gospel lesson today. That would be to say, I don't care about black lives, so I don't agree that black lives matter. But that's not a Christian response. There's another response that is equally problematic. In the US, back in 2013 when BLM became a movement after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Travon Martin, it was common in some circles to hear the response, well, don't "All lives matter?" Even this summer, as the Black Lives Matter movement burst open world-wide, we still witnessed people, usually white people, rejecting or resisting the claims of the movement by insisting that "all lives matter".

But insisting that all lives matter, in response to black lives matter, shuts down any need to address the point that the BLM movement is making, which is that from their point of view, racism is still a problem in our society, and that Black people keep dying because of it. Saying All lives matter refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of their complaint. It asserts a moral principle that no one can argue with, thus relieving a person of having to do anything about the problem that is being identified. In a way, it's like Jesus taking a principled stand, so that he doesn't have to do anything for the woman. Having proclaimed a general truth, that his mission is only to the house of Israel, he can ignore her particular truth and move on.

Imagine the use of the phrase that "something matters" in another context, say of an NFL football team. Imagine it's a losing team that has struggled offensively for some time. It has both an offensive program for the team and a defensive program for the team, each with its own set of players, its own budget, and its own coaching and support staff. Of course, both aspects of the team should be pursued equally, but what if this particular team's offensive program has been neglected for a while, while the defense has received more attention and resources. In the face of this neglect, pundits and fans with an interest in the success of the team would have to insist in a debate that, in fact "offense matters". Yes, of course, defense matters too. Both aspects matter, but using this

argument doesn't address the problem. If someone in power over the team stubbornly insists this point every time the problem of the neglected offense is brought up, then that person is not recognizing the problem in its current context. The problem can't be fixed if those in power to change the situation can't be convinced that in this case, for this team, at this moment in time, "offense matters."

Likewise, it may be true, philosophically, that Jews and Gentiles both matter to God, but in the case of this Canaanite woman, that general truth doesn't help her at all. God's love for all people may be a nice notion, but in this case it isn't moving Jesus to use his power to help her. She has to find a way to insist, to move him, to push him to acknowledge that right now, Sir, in this moment, Canaanite lives matter.

Likewise, it may be true, philosophically, that all human lives matter, but in the case of race relations in the United States of America at this time, in 2020, people have to insist that Black Lives Matter. It's a plea to not ignore the problem, but face it. Don't explain it away with some philosophical truth, but recognize how that truth is not actually true at this time, in this context.

Here's what redeems Jesus in our eyes, and helps us use this story to sort through our own response to the claims of other vulnerable people in our own time. When the Canaanite woman takes Jesus' own metaphor of food for the children of Israel and flips it back on him, Jesus is willing to acknowledge her claim. He is willing to have his heart and mind changed. He is willing to hear her plea, and recognize it as legitimate. It may be true that Jesus has come only for the lost sheep of Israel, but here in the heart of this non-jewish woman, he has found faith too. This is what Matthew is trying to help his church see in his version of the story.

So our outlook on the world and especially toward those who cry for justice must be open to challenge. Because in the end, Jesus was open to the challenge. This story trains our minds and hearts to view the plight of other vulnerable people as an opportunity to show mercy. Thus, when our government separates migrant children from their adult caretakers and puts them in holding pens, the church of Jesus Christ says to the US government, migrant lives matter. When it is revealed, just this past week, that the government of Greece has been turning away asylum

seekers by sailing them out to the edge of Greek territorial waters and then abandoning them in inflatable life rafts, the church says to the Greek Government, Asylum seekers' lives matter.

The church is an assembly of people around the world, gathered by the ministry of Jesus Christ, who when faced with such abuse and neglect, are willing to stand up and call out for change. The church is willing to do this because Jesus was willing to face the Canaanite woman, change his mind, and respond to her by using his power to save her. Yes, Jesus may have had to be confronted with that claim in a way that woke him up, but in the end, Jesus agreed. May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.