

## Sunday of the Canaanite Woman 2006: The Politically Incorrect Jesus

A sermon by the Rev. David G. Subu  
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Gospel: Gospel: Matthew 15:21-28 (Canaanite Woman)

At that time, <sup>21</sup>Then Jesus went out from there and departed to the region of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup>And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed." <sup>23</sup>But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she cries out after us." <sup>24</sup>But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." <sup>25</sup>Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" <sup>26</sup>But He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." <sup>27</sup>And she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." <sup>28</sup>Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Christ is among us!

Have you ever been offended by a fellow Christian? Have you ever been put off by something someone in the Church has said? Have you ever felt slighted by one who is supposed to be your brother or sister in Christ? If you have not, raised your hand! If you did that don't worry, you soon enough will be. Not because Christians are rude or offensive by nature, but because all people are at least once in a while because of our sins and the insensitivity that brings, or because our sins and our pride which gets puffed up and then is easily bruised. One thing is for sure, you will know you are in the church of Christ if you experience offense. Just as Christ was bruised for our iniquities and by His stripes we are healed, so we too will have to experience that bruising of our egos if we are ever to grow in Christ and become subject to Him in love and understanding. Today's Gospel is perhaps one of the most difficult we can find, and at its heart is the understanding that to have love and faith and healing means sometimes that we have to be willing to humble ourselves.

One day Christ was visiting the Jewish community on the coast, in the ancient cities of Tyre and Sidon which were home to the last vestiges of the Canaanite culture with whom the Hebrews had warred so long ago. And while the Lord was there, a woman of that almost extinct and enemy race came to Him and asked Him to heal her daughter, who was severely possessed. But Jesus answered her not a word. So she cried out even more loudly and urgently, so much that the disciples were embarrassed and asked Christ to send her away. But He only answered back, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” How could this be? Is this the same Jesus we know and love, who stopped the men from stoning the woman caught in adultery, who healed the centurion’s servant, who stood up for the weak and the oppressed? But here He is willfully ignoring a woman in desperate need—on the basis of what seems to be racial discrimination!

But look here. It only gets worse! Somehow, this woman was not put off by this neglect, this offense, but when He said, “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” she came and fell down at His feet and worshipped Him. But He only said, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs.” Can you believe this? He is actually equating this human being, this grieving, hopeless, and helpless parent with a dog! And not even a noble dog, like a shepherd or a war dog that can be respected, but a little dog—a yapper! It’s unimaginable! Who among us would ever accept to be treated this way? Yet God acts according to a wisdom that is very different than our own—as far away as the east is from the west! Somehow He knew what He was doing even if His disciples and we did not. Hear the response of the woman of Canaan: “Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” To which the Lord replied as the great weight of suspense and uncertainty was lifted from the hearts of His disciples, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this story is not all that unique. Each and every one of us at not only one but likely many points in our spiritual journey will experience the plight of the Canaanite woman. Each and every one of will look for a kind word or a healing gesture from a

fellow Christian and find neglect, insensitivity, and even scorn. It may well be through no fault of our own and completely sinful on the part of the person doing it. But even if it is, God has allowed it to be for a greater purpose. He places in our life (we might say, “in our way!”), for our salvation just so we might have a chance to bear the cross of Christ and grow in faith and spiritual understanding. The Lord says elsewhere, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 18:3 NRSV). A child accepts admonishment the way the Canaanite woman did—boldly and without ceasing to still plead her case for help! Likewise, the Lord said, “Blessed are you when people revile you [that is insult you]...for my sake.” The immediate meaning of this Beatitude is that blessed are those who persecuted for being Christian. But it is also true that we are blessed when we accept a little ego-bruising in general for the sake of Christ and His gospel, so that we might grow spiritually in humility.

There is a story which my spiritual father told me which I now tell you. A young man in school was very virtuous except for one major flaw. He had a terrible time accepting criticism of any sort. He would lose his temper and fall apart when challenged or insulted. So he went to his spiritual father who gave him a penance. Now a penance is not a punishment but a therapeutic prescription meant to heal the patient, even though, like all medicines, it can taste bad going down and feel like punishment at first. And this penance was particularly difficult for this young man. His spiritual father said, every time a person offends you or criticizes you, you have to give them a dollar. The young man went away with some dread, but being otherwise virtuous and obedient he did as he was told. For two years he gave a dollar to every person that said something to rile his ego, until at last his spiritual father said he could now stop. By that time, the young man was ready to go off to college at the city. Back in the days of this story, the young

men from the outlying villages would all walk then to the city to begin their studies. And of the road as they walked there was an old man sitting. He would berate and belittle every young man who came, saying things like, “Who do you think you are? Where do you think you are going? Do you really believe you can make it? You’re not smart enough. You’re not good looking enough. You’re too lazy, etc. He seemed to know exactly what to say to dishearten each young man because each one would turn back and go home, giving up. Then our young protagonist came up and heard everything the old man had to say. Instead of turning around with head down, he just started laughing. The old man was of course very surprised. He said, “Why are you laughing? Didn’t you hear what I said?” To which the young man replied, “Oh yes, I heard. I’m laughing because for the last two years I had to pay for this kind of treatment. Now I can get it for free!” At which point the old man turned with his hand to open the way, saying, “Son, the city belongs to you. Go and do well!” He could have just as easily said in the words of the Lord, “Great is your faith, let it be done for you as you desire!”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, welcome to the city of God [gesturing to the church as a whole]. He or she who enters here must be willing to suffer a little bruising, and be willing to put aside pride and self-esteem. But if you are willing, God will bless you with a freedom and a fearlessness that will make you mightier in word and deed than you ever imagined. Healing of hurts long nursed in the depths of our hearts will be granted, and the ability to love each other without perfectionism will spring forth. And the next time someone does something that would normally set you off, you will be able to laugh about it and give thanks to God for blessing you with such wonderful opportunities to shine in the light of His Holy Gospel. May He who humbles us and raises us up again, Christ our True God, together with his Father Co-eternal and Holy and Life-creating Spirit, have mercy on us and save us, amen.