

So, today we might have some strong feelings. I might say things you've never heard a person say from a pulpit. You might hear Jesus say some things you've never heard Jesus say before. And that's ok. We're in this together. Ready? Buckled in? It's going to be a lot today.

First, I want to remind us of where we've been recently. Jesus is very well known and very popular with the public. He's a celebrity. When people hear that he's near, they drop what they're doing and flock to him. Thousands of people found him in a deserted place in chapter fourteen. Then he crosses over the Sea of Galilee and it says, "After the people of that place recognized him, they sent word throughout the region and brought all who were sick to him and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed."

And when our story for today ends, he returns to great crowds and thousands of people surrounding him again. He has to feed thousands more in a second feeding miracle. He is just unable to have a quiet day in Galilee anymore. It's exhausting. Some of you have said how tiring it is to host 5 guests, or 8. Someone of you have spoken to me about family reunions with 75 or 80 people. That's exhausting even if you're an extrovert. But imagine thousands of people, wanting your attention. Wanting to touch you. Wanting to speak to you.

And even though Jesus was fully divine. He was also fully human and needed a break. Like any parent who locks themselves in the bathroom for five minutes, Jesus needed some alone time.

He also could feel the mounting tension growing between the religious authorities and himself. In the first twenty verses of chapter fifteen, the religious authorities tell him that he and his disciples are not following the commandments properly. And he calls them hypocrites to their faces and then explains to the disciples how basic digestion works (in one end and out the other) and how the words that come out of our mouths come from our hearts and reveal who we truly are.

Jesus is getting frustrated, and tired, and he senses a need to withdraw and ease the tension in the air. And ease the tension in his own mind.

So, he heads out. Verse 21 says, “Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.” He and the disciples walk 35 miles. At least two days of walking. That’s like going from here to Warwick, or rather, if Jesus is starting in a populated place like Warwick, he heads to the coast – to Westerly.

He went northwest from Galilee, toward the Mediterranean Sea. Tyre and Sidon are coastal towns. They’re outside of the jurisdiction of Herod. It’s another country - Phoenicia. We know of it in other Biblical references. This area was known for worshipping false gods, for producing people like Queen Jezebel, who was not a good person. Sometimes they were allies of the Israelites, but mostly they were enemies who did not worship the God of Abraham.

And Jesus went there intentionally. In Mark’s gospel, it says, “He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice.”

Can you imagine the life of a person who draws the attention of thousands? Having lived in San Antonio, where the only professional team is the five-time champion Spurs, we know how to treat our celebrities. If they are dining at the same restaurant as you, you can say their name, get their attention, make eye contact with them, smile, wave, and then leave them the heck alone. Even to this day, retired Spurs want to live in San Antonio because they can go to the zoo or go for a bike ride in a city park and not get harassed by the locals.

But in Galilee, everyone wanted to touch Jesus, listen to Jesus, be near him; so, Jesus was tired. Jesus was feeling the tension. Jesus was sensing the growing threat that would eventually take his life. And he needed a break.

But none of that really excuses what happens next. If you’ve never heard this scripture before, hold on to your hat. Verse 22 begins by saying, “²² Just then a Canaanite [or Syrophonecian] woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” ²³ But

he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Jesus ignores her. A mother who needs help for her daughter. She addresses him as Lord, Son of David. She’s giving him a title of enormous authority and historical significance – Son of David is a title meant for the Messiah. She recognizes him as set apart. Powerful. She believes he’s able to help, and she desperately needs help.

And Jesus ignores her.

Nevertheless, she persists. She continues crying out for help, so much so that she’s causing a scene – something Jesus came to the region to avoid. So, his disciples urge him to send her away.

“Send her away” . . . where have we heard that before? Oh yeah, two weeks ago, the disciples used the same word, Ἀπόλυσον (ah-PAW-lih-sohn), to urge Jesus to send the thousands of people away as evening set in. It seems they are always eager to scatter and dismiss people. I think they’re trying to protect him. I really do, but it’s just interesting that it’s their go-to move. Send her away. Send everyone away.

But instead of inviting her to sit down and eat as Jesus did in chapter 14, he then says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Really? What? How does that make sense? Gentile wise men responded to his birth. Gentile Egyptians embraced his family when they had to flee from Herod when he was a toddler. Jesus healed a Gentile man known as the Gerasene Demoniac.

Did he actually think that his mission on earth was just to help the people of Israel? Did he feel like the woman didn’t deserve as much attention and care?

Many scholars believe this to be true. Smart people believe that Jesus believed that he was sent to earth so that the Jewish people would repent and follow him as the Messiah and that through the people the whole world would come to know the kingdom

of God on earth. They believe Jesus was still focused on the people of the Temple and Torah.

Therefore, they see this moment in chapter 15, that Jesus never anticipated, as a pivotal one in Jesus' understanding of his own mission, ministry, and purpose on earth. They credit this woman, this desperate mother, as one who helps Jesus expand his purpose and vision for what he is capable of and who he is here to serve.

In his commentary *Matthew for Everyone*, theologian N.T. Wright says, "The disciples, and perhaps Jesus himself, are not yet ready for [the events of Holy Week, but] This foreign woman is already insisting upon Easter." Now, Wright isn't suggesting that she anticipates Jesus' death and resurrection, but she recognizes him as the Messiah and, and she's not waiting for Jesus to send the Good News out into the world through the disciples and other believers, she's coming for it herself, from him.

Verses 25-26 say, "²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' "²⁶ [Jesus] answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.'"

Ew. That's awful, Jesus. Don't equate this woman and her child with dogs. What I hear when he says that are white men calling men of color "son" or the "n-word" or the Nazis saying that Jews and gypsies are less than human. I am so, so uncomfortable with this verse. Excuse it if you want, but I just can't stomach this moment in time when he speaks with such racial prejudice to a desperate mother.

But the woman jumps right into the image. She doesn't reject it. She reframes it. ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

In essence, she's saying, "Sure, we may be dogs to you. Fine, I'm not going to argue for my self-worth or get so offended by the insult that I lose focus on my purpose – which is my daughter's well-being. If you are the Messiah, then you've got more than enough power to go around. Feed the Israelites first. Sure. Heal them first. That's fine. But if you're the Son of God, then there has got to be enough for my daughter, too."

And, I think, in that moment, Jesus is floored. Stopped in his tracks. I think he's humbled. I think he's embarrassed maybe. And I think he's learning from her.

²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that moment.

Great is your faith. The wording here is striking. Jesus, especially in Matthew's gospel, keeps pointing out people who have "little faith." His disciples have little faith. The crowds have little faith. The Pharisees have little faith. But on the other hand, the two people in the gospel of Matthew who have great faith? Those *two* individuals? Gentiles. The Roman Centurion and the Canaanite woman. Their faith is great. And Jesus notices. And he answers their prayers and heals from a distance.

Now, you may be theologically squirming right now because you may have never heard about this interaction before. You may have this image in your head of Jesus being eternally patient, eternally happy, eternally ready with a kind word and healing touch. You may think of him more as divine than human – able to give and give and give without ever growing tired or hungry or short-tempered. It may throw you into an absolute emotional blender to think that Jesus ignored someone or spoke to them in such a harsh way.

I get it. There is an enormous part of our church history and theology that is centered around Jesus being perfect here on earth. Unblemished. Without sin. So most internet searches about this passage come up with people trying to justify what he said. He was being sarcastic some say. Dogs wasn't a derogatory term! People love their dogs! Dogs are members of the family! And Israelites always did have special billing in God's eyes. It's not racist, it's just fact. Jesus was going to get to the Gentiles eventually. She just sped things up.

But there are some scholars of great wisdom and repute who believe that Jesus was changed by this encounter. That his eyes were opened by her vision of who he was and what he could do for her daughter. His response to her evolves in this encounter. He ignored her. He told the disciples that he wasn't there for her. He told her that the

people of Israel were getting all his attention and blessings and it was not fair to take from them to give to her.

But as she persists, he seems to realize that his power and grace are infinitely abundant. That he does, in fact, have enough for the “children” and the “dogs” and the “cats” and the “rats” and the “seagulls” and the “squirrels” and the whole wide world.

He has enough. He is enough. And thanks be to God, the disciples watched the whole thing and learned from it, because as the church grew, it primarily became a battle between Jews and Gentiles and how to worship, and the disciples remembered moments like these when great faith was revealed in the most unexpected people and places.

He just wanted to get away and sit on the beach and relax. But look at what just happened. She made a way for gentiles like us to be included. Thanks be to God for her persistence. Amen.