



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

May 8, 2016

"The God Who Loves Us When Life Is a Mess"

(Encounters with Jesus)

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Matt. 15:21 From there Jesus took a trip to Tyre and Sidon.

Matt. 15:22 They had hardly arrived when a Canaanite woman came down from the hills and pleaded, "Mercy, Master, Son of David! My daughter is cruelly afflicted by an evil spirit."

Matt. 15:23 Jesus ignored her. The disciples came and complained, "Now she's bothering us. Would you please take care of her? She's driving us crazy."

Matt. 15:24 Jesus refused, telling them, "I've got my hands full dealing with the lost sheep of Israel."

Matt. 15:25 Then the woman came back to Jesus, went to her knees, and begged. "Master, help me."

Matt. 15:26 He said, "It's not right to take bread out of children's mouths and throw it to dogs."

Matt. 15:27 She was quick: "You're right, Master, but beggar dogs do get scraps from the master's table."

Matt. 15:28 Jesus gave in. "Oh, woman, your faith is something else. What you want is what you get!" Right then her daughter became well.

Today we are going to look at a mother's story. As you have now heard the passage, it may seem confusing. You may wonder, "Why on earth, did you choose this passage for today, Dan? It's Mother's Day." Trust

me— by the end of this sermon, you will see how God loves all of us – whether mother, father, daughter or son – even when our lives are a mess.

For our sermon series called Encounters with Jesus, we have chosen episodes of people's encounters with Jesus, as recorded in the Bible, that are remarkably important. This one with the Canaanite woman is no exception. The passage describes the only time Jesus was ever outside of the Jewish territories. This shows that the gospel is always supposed to go out to the whole world – beyond our comfort zone, to people we may not know or with whom we would not be comfortable.

Our story begins with Jesus going into the first century area of Tyre and Sidon, which we know today as Lebanon. Jesus wanted some time alone away from the crowds, so He went to an area where no Jew would follow Him into Gentile country. It was also a time He could get away from His Jewish enemies – the Scribes and Pharisees - those tough law makers who constantly criticized Him because He was too free-spirited for their legalistic ways.

Jesus and the disciples are in this area in Lebanon when a non-Jewish woman, a Canaanite or, as some versions call her, a Syro-phenician woman comes up to Jesus shouting and pleading, "Mercy, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is cruelly afflicted by an evil spirit."

Amazingly, Jesus ignored her. This must be a teaching moment because Jesus doesn't ignore people. The disciples complained, "She's bothering us. Would you please take care of her? She's driving us crazy."

If you're a good mom or a good dad, you would probably do anything for your child who is sick. You would press the issue to get her help. So here is a mom whose child is demonically afflicted, and so even though she is not Jewish, even though she is not a follower of the Messiah, she goes up to Jesus and shouts, "Mercy, Son of David, help me!"

The Canaanite woman is smart to use that title for she has heard people call Jesus that. "Son of David" refers to the house of King David from which He came. It's a political title reflecting His earthly power.

Back then the Jews thought non-Jews were lost, sinful, and would never get salvation even if they follow all of the rules and regulations of the Jews. But this Gentile mom is so daring. She will do anything to see if Jesus can heal her daughter. She is willing to go to Jesus, a rabbi of a Jewish people who don't respect her.

As an aside, I don't have time to go into whether people can be affected by demons. But the biblical answer is yes. And I will pick this up in a later sermon. As you have heard me say before, not believing in Satan and demons means they have won half the battle already.

But the good news is that Jesus has power over them so we don't have to be afraid, just aware.

Now back to the story. This woman has heard that Jesus has power over evil, power over demons, and can physically heal people. So she goes through a crowd, desperate to get to Jesus. And what happens? Incredibly, Jesus ignores her! So she starts pestering Jesus' disciples, trying to get them to get her to Jesus, who then say to Jesus, "She's really bothering us. Would you PLEASE take care of her? She's driving us crazy!"

And Jesus answers with this stunning response: "I've got my hands full dealing with the lost sheep of Israel." (Matt. 15:24)

It is at this point that you all are thinking, "Dan, this is a horrible Mother's Day sermon. And this is really a bad picture of Jesus. What is going on? This isn't the Jesus we know!"

Remember how I told you the last time I preached that when it comes to reading the Bible, we have to be like detectives. We can't always take things at face value. We need to investigate and think it through. So what the heck is happening here? Jesus seems so aloof or rude. But He really isn't, is He?

Here's the context. The Old Testament is all about how God chose one people – the Jews, and through those people, humankind would learn how God acts. They would be the prototype, the model, the example. They are the focus of the Old Testament, which is the first half of the Bible. The Jews were blessed. They were given kings. They were given land. They were given the Ten Commandments and wise sayings like Proverbs and beautiful poetry like the Psalms. . They were given prophets like Isaiah, Hosea, Jeremiah who

would give them direct, supernatural messages from God.

They were given strong faithful leaders who tried to teach them about God like Moses and King David. But the Israelites of old, the political leaders and the people, were not always faithful to God and often killed the prophets and didn't follow the leaders.

Hear me clearly. The point is NOT that the Jews are dumber or less faithful than we about God. The point is, if you were to insert any other people – whether Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Germans, Italians, Bolivians, Nicaraguans, the Irish, the English - they would just be as sinful as the Jews. History has shown that through war crimes, slavery, and oppression of the weak. All countries, all nationalities have had people and regimes that were sinful and would not follow God even though God had blessed them.

But it was also from the Jews that God chose the Messiah to come. Jesus was born a Jew and lived among the Jews, and He announced to them that He was there to save them. Again, they were the people God chose to be the laboratory model for all humankind to see how people respond to God. Jesus called these people the lost sheep of Israel since they often turned their face away from God. As I said, they had such faithful leaders in Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and King David, but the people still turned away from God – just as Americans and many of its leaders are turning away from God today.

When God taught the world about Himself, He started with Jesus saving the Jewish people first. So when Jesus said, "I've got my hands full dealing with the lost sheep of Israel," or in the NRSV version, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," that was the truth.

First century Israel had no Internet, Twitter, TV or Facebook. Jesus could only begin with one nation at a time.

In the eyes of the Jews, Gentiles like this Canaanite woman, would not be saved. There is nothing they could do to be saved – no accomplishment, no resume, no following of rules and rituals. Nothing would save them. So when the woman said, "Lord help me," and He responded with, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," Jesus was stating how Jews saw Gentiles – they were like dogs. They won't be blessed by God.

Jesus was not being sarcastic; He was simply stating how the Jews in that historical period viewed non-Jews, and how the Jews felt they were the real children of God, and everyone else were not. Notice how Jesus called them the lost sheep. He was saying that all people, Jews or Gentiles, are lost without God.

But like a good mother, this woman is not going to take no for an answer. She is not going to be repelled because she heard that Jesus loves all people, whether Jewish or Samaritan or even a Canaanite. So she comes back with a great line: "Yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." (Matt. 15:27) She is saying, "But surely, if we Gentiles are sinners, if we are just dogs, then even dogs can experience some grace or mercy from God."

And then the soundtrack goes "Dun Dun!" This is great. This is pivotal. This is important. This is the gospel. The first step of the gospel is to realize that we, meaning all of us, don't deserve God's love. We don't deserve it nor do we work for it. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. And there are no rules and rituals that if we followed would automatically get us to heaven.

I know this sounds weird, but we have to come to the realization that we are sinners, imperfect, flawed and there is no human act that will save us. Only when we realize that all of us are deeply flawed, deeply self-centered in so many ways, then and only then can we sing the most famous of all American hymns – *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was blind but now am found.*

This hymn was written by a slave owner and slave seller John Newton, who one day realized in the depths of his soul, that he needed Jesus and what he was doing was wrong. Only the grace of God, a grace that shows all of God's love and forgiveness, could save a wretch like him. So he wrote this song about his conversion, which is now estimated to be performed 10 million times a year, and has appeared on 11,000 albums. Even Newton's biography has gone to Broadway.

We live this life so blind – so often thinking that if we are rich, if we have a huge a stock portfolio, if we party, if we drink heavily or use drugs, or if we spend a lot of money, we will be truly happy. That is blindness. That is demonic thinking. Until we accept the grace of Jesus and live as He wants us to, we don't really live. We are blind.

Our real closeness to God starts with us admitting that we don't deserve God's love. The Canaanite woman got it right. She is saying, "I get it. In your society I don't have a place at the table. Maybe we are just dogs. The Jewish people say there is nothing we Canaanites can do to deserve forgiveness or blessings. I get that. But I need Jesus."

And I think it's with that same humility that we must start our faith journey. We need to admit that we are powerless to make any good

changes in our life unless God is part of our life. When we think we deserve a place at the table because we are so awesome, so amazing, so accomplished, then we don't get close to God. It's opposite day. When we realize we DON'T deserve a place at the table, that's when God welcomes us to His table. We are invited to have a place because of His grace, not because we are so accomplished or popular.

Our admission ticket to church is to actually say, we are messed up. We need God's grace. When people say that the church of full of hypocrites, I say, "That's right. That's how you get in! You say you're imperfect. You say one then do another. We should have t-shirts made that say "iHypocrite."

This is hard for us. Human nature defaults to thinking life or God Himself owes us something, like a life with great wealth, continual happiness and no pain. But the reality is, God does NOT owe us anything, nor do we deserve anything on our own merits. But when God's love and forgiveness comes rolling into our lives, then we can sing "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." (Some hymnals are dropping that word, "wretch" but then they miss out on what grace really means.)

The irony is that when we admit we are not perfect as a mom or dad or as a son or daughter or a friend, then we can receive God's grace. But if we think we are perfect or super strong, then God's grace has a hard time penetrating our lives.

The Canaanite woman was just confessing, "Okay, I'm lost, I'm in trouble, I'm blind to the ways of God. But I need God to save me and my daughter." And that is when Jesus says, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed

instantly." (Matt. 15:28) It's a happy ending, with answered prayer for a good mom.

Healing works best when a person comes in humility and says, "I have tried everything else, so, God, please help me." That is when God can work best. In our story, Jesus answered the request of the loving mother because she believed and confessed that only Jesus could help her child. In the end it is a good Mother's Day story. The desperate mom finds Jesus who does listen to her and answers her prayer and showers her and her daughter with love and health.

Before that, the Canaanite woman was at a total loss. She had a demonically affected daughter. She was surrounded by people who called her a dog. She felt so unappreciated and she was desperate as a mom to help her daughter. But she had a holy hunch about Jesus. He is really the Savior of the world.

Maybe for years, you have been thinking, God has abandoned me. How could He have allowed someone to abuse me? How could He have allowed my loved ones to die? How could He have allowed my friends to die in the armed services? I have felt for years that God is treating me like a dog. I feel so unappreciated as a mother. Where is God? I don't see any healing or hope. I ask you to consider a bigger picture, a bigger context of a loving God and what it means to meet Him as He comes to us out of a crowd.

Two weeks ago in our Alpha Course, a woman named Naomi Trenier shared a beautiful story in her teaching on prayer. I want to share with you that story, but take it a little farther. Naomi was on a train and a group of schoolgirls got on. They were all crammed in. While on their journey, suddenly, one of the girls collapsed to the floor.

She might have been having a seizure. She lost control of her bodily functions and peed, soaking her clothes and everything else. Trains have these ridges on the floor and so her urine trickled down the floor and everyone was standing in it.

Suddenly, a man in maybe his forties went to the fallen girl and sat down next to her in the urine on the floor of the train, and put his arms around her even though she was soaked in her waste. He pulled her towards him and let her head rest on his chest. When she came to, she didn't try to pull away from him. She sensed his compassion and care, maybe his loving eyes as he held her.

This is what Jesus does. He gets into the mess of our lives. Imagine Him stepping into the filth of our lives, holding us, not caring if He is getting soiled by our mess or sin.

When I think of those who have been abused, or who have gone through a trauma or a loss, or a conflict in a relationship, or those who are suffering depression, financial difficulty or those who can't be parents, I want to say—Imagine Jesus there holding you. He is crying as loud as you, if not more—wailing, grieving for the loss. That is the kind of God Jesus is. He would walk barefoot into our mess to be with us and hold us.

But you ask, "Would He really do that? With all of my mess? With my clothes soaked by failure? With my demonic attacks all around me harassing me?"

I say yes, and if you look at His bare feet, you will notice that it is covered with His blood, having dripped down from the wounds that He suffered when He was on the cross. He would walk across burning coals of hell to get to us to hold us, and in reality He did just that.

Jesus took on all of our messes. He took on all of the satanic/demonic hate and prejudices where people think we are dogs in this world. He absorbed it and with His death took it and protected us all. Like a friend who jumped on a grenade to save us all, He did that on the cross.

When we as a mother or father or those who are not parents can pass on this good news of Jesus to our children, to friends and family or strangers, then that makes it the best Mother's Day or Father's Day of all, for we are all spiritual parents who birth new followers of Christ.

When we realize, that we don't deserve His love, His healing, or a place at His table, that it is all due to His amazing grace, that He loves us and holds us, then we can have strength and hope for tomorrow and forever. Then indeed we can sing all the verses of that famous hymn.

Let's close our eyes as I read all the lyrics of the hymn Amazing Grace, and at the end I'll ask us to rise and sing them. But for now, let these words cascade over our bodies and soak our souls as we close our eyes.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now, I see.*

*T'was Grace that taught
my heart to fear.
And Grace, my fears relieved.
How precious did that Grace appear.
the hour I first believed.*

*Through many dangers,
Toils and snares
We have already come.
T'was Grace that brought us safe thus
far and Grace will lead us home.*

*The Lord has promised good to me
His word my hope secures.
He will my shield and portion be
as long as life endures.*

*When we've been here ten thousand
years bright shining as the sun.
We've no less days to sing God's
praise than when we've first begun.*

Now let us rise and sing this song to our Lord in great thanksgiving.