

“The Genetic Make Up of Faith”

Matthew 15:21-28

September 5, 2021

Okay, I’m just going to go ahead and ask the question: What is going on in this passage? We’ve got demon possession, a woman being called a dog, a very un-Jesus-like Jesus, scornful disciples, and—finally—a miraculous healing.

Let’s talk about Jesus first, shall we? For all the pomp and circumstance that we attribute to Jesus’ ministry during his time on earth, this story doesn’t really make sense. We’re used to the stories—we’re used to the *Jesus*—who welcomes small children, heals people experiencing blindness and physical ailments, a Jesus who changes water into wine so a wedding party can continue celebrating. You know these heart-warming stories of Christ. Not stories of snarky Jesus. Not a Jesus who turns his back on a woman begging for healing for her daughter. Not an un-Jesus-y Jesus who fully ignores and then rebukes someone simply because he doesn’t believe that she *belongs* with him.

But really, this woman *doesn’t* belong with Jesus. She’s a Gentile from the land of Sidon and Tyre, which did not get along with the Jews for both religious and political reasons. She’s a woman in a male-dominated world, wandering the streets, begging a fairly well-known man to heed her cries. Of all the people to be following Christ around, this woman is the least expected and the most unwelcomed. She is the opposite of the people Jesus thought he should be seeking out in the world.

The disciples know this, too. Like any good group of loyal followers, they rally around Jesus as he makes his getaway from the woman crying in the street. When the uninvited woman continues her pleas over and over again, they just can’t help themselves. They can’t watch this woman beg anymore. They implore

Jesus, “Have some mercy on us and on her. Stop her shouting. Send her away already!”

Jesus does turn, but not to send her away. Jesus turns to explain to his disciples why she’s not worth his time to send away. He turns to them to reiterate to them and to the woman that she *doesn’t belong* with him. And what happens next changes the world of faith forever.

Since the beginning of time, people have tried to find ways of belonging, ways to find their space in the world. Often, this comes with a commonality, a theme that’s woven into these places of community. Sports, for example, bring together people who enjoy watching or playing a specific game or event. If you’re an avid IU or Purdue fan, it’s probably not a game for you; it’s life or death, but you get it. We put on our team colors, we gather at a location with thousands of our favorite people, and all of us together cheer for the same team. We have a common goal, a common theme, something that fuses us together. We win together. We lose together. We belong.

However, belonging to something isn’t always joyful. There are moments and places in which belonging to something causes friction in our lives. Sometimes in our yearning to belonging, we find that we’re actually met with isolation, even when we find ourselves in groups in which we thought we fit. The same places that bring us together and unify us can also be the places and spaces that hurt us the most and make us feel incredibly unwanted. Finding places of belonging—true belonging—changes our world, charges our emotions, and calms our fears of isolation, for the most part. But the fact of the matter is that there’s always a risk of unbelonging when we gather together; there’s always a risk of us being the one left

out of a place that we felt and we hoped would be secure, but turns out to be completely unknown.

The Canaanite woman discovers that she does not fit into Jesus' group in Matthew 15. But, friends, she *does* fit into the group of many people in search of healing. Clearly, she's heard stories of Christ and his miraculous healings, and honestly we have to give her credit. For someone who, for all intents and purposes, shouldn't be confident approaching Jesus, she strides right up to him regardless of what might happen. Her daughter is in need. She's seen how Jesus has cared for other people. Just maybe he can help?

Instead of welcome, and instead of the possibility of healing, she's met first with silence and then disdain. Really, it's a true marvel that after the way he treats her she's still convinced that he is the answer to her need. Basically, at first, Jesus says no, for she does not belong to the group of faithful people for whom he came. But we see the true character of this woman because in the face of that denial, *she does not give in*. She holds tightly to the reason for which she came: to find healing for her daughter through the one whom she believes has the power to do so.

As Jesus first turns away from her initial pleas, speaking to her as if she is a dog begging for crumbs, she falls to her knees and pleads again. She is not dismayed by his flippancy, or even his horrific reference to the Gentiles as second-hand creatures that beg for food. She leans into this criticism of her. She even claims it for herself, and in doing so, she transforms it to be the very thing that gains Jesus' attention. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." This woman claims that even though she doesn't belong, she truly believes that God's grace covers her, too. And when Jesus turns to her, he finally sees her. Her tenacity and deep conviction that she deserves God's mercy bring her fully into the presence of Christ. It's not about her political, regional, or religious standing. Her simple humanity is the ingredient of faith.

"Woman, great is your faith!" Jesus says. "Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was

healed instantly.

It is the woman, not Jesus in this story, who teaches us the breadth of faith. This woman in Matthew 15 is the mother of faith for *all* people because she believes that everyone—everyone—is included in God's wide and expansive love. And she doesn't just have blind faith that accepts rejection and disappointment—blind faith that forces her to move forward in the world without any sense of belonging or security. This woman has faith that shifts the whole world. She *claims* the faith that she has; she claims faith that Jesus will care for her. She knows that she might not necessarily belong, but her faith that God's mercy and healing is for everyone fits right in.

From May until early August of 2019, I served as chaplain in a hospital in downtown Austin, Texas. This was and still is a trauma-1 hospital, so we had a bit of a revolving door. Patients came in and out on a daily basis, many of them simply being a name on a chart. I was stationed on the fifth floor of the hospital, which served as a catch-all for long-term patients. This meant that for many of them, I came to know them, and they came to know me.

Tracy was one of these patients who was frequently admitted to the hospital and almost always landed on the fifth floor. We nicknamed him the Singing Cowboy because he wore brown cowboy boots, jeans, and a button-up plaid shirt. He knew every country song out there by heart, and he would sing them to us in a southern twang. Tracy was homeless. He suffered from a lot of different ailments and mostly checked himself in to the hospital to find a clean bed. On one particular occasion of me visiting him in his room, he pointed outside the window to the street below, and he said with pride, "You see that corner? That's where I live." When I inquired if he found it to be homey, he said, "Oh yeah, I get to see everyone on that corner. They know me." He proceeded to whip out his Bible and share with me his favorite verses, verses that reminded him of God's love. Tracy was an unexpected fountain of faith. No circumstance, no sickness, no social status, could

keep him from believing that he was known and that he was loved, and that *he belonged to God*.

Friends, we all belong to faith. The Canaanite woman shows this to us as she lays at Jesus' feet, begging him to see her, and he does. And Jesus, having seen her, sees *us*. No one is left out of faith. Jesus seals it on our hearts. We are made in God's image, and this means that being people of faith is *who we are*. Faith is built into our very being. It is entangled in our DNA.

In our entanglement with our faithful God, we find that we are not just linked to Christ, but we are linked to each other. Faith that claims us all as people who belong to the kingdom of God. We are people who receive God's mercy. And this call to love one another is a call to give ourselves over to each other, because we know that we are inextricably connected. We are accountable to one another. Faith trickles down, person by person, and soaks us all in the interconnection of humanity that cannot be unbound. Your pain is my pain; my pain is your pain. Faith is not just some far-off feeling or thought. It is action here and now. You are me, and I am you, and together we are one in Christ. And we truly are connected. We are connected to the Hurricane Ida wreckage, to the Louisiana heat waves and power outages. We are connected to those experiencing wildfires, earthquakes, terror in Afghanistan. We're connected to those who are afraid of pandemic variants and vaccine stipulations. We're connected to those who reside in hospital beds, those who need healing, the terrors that take place in our own city. We're connected to the things that divide our communities. We're connected to the Tracys of the world and to the children all over the universe who need some love, who need someone to fight for them. We are connected. Faith for us in this story is the conviction that each and every one of these people—those in this story and those in our world—each of them belong to God, no matter if we think so or not. God's mercy and love extend to all.

The woman finally experiences Jesus' healing in her child's life because she fully lived into God's mercy. She

believed, even when others didn't, that she belonged with Jesus, that she deserved connection to Christ that others were promised. She believed that her daughter deserved the same connection to God. This woman's faith covers not just herself, but her daughter as well. And I'll bet she would have fought for us, too.

When our children were sitting on the chancel steps just a few moments ago, I thanked them for this stole that I have around me now, this stole that they made for me. It has a few different words on it: hope, love, peace, and joy. And this is just one example of the ways in which we literally cover each other, of all ages, in faith. We cover each other with hope. With love. With peace.

Our faith, and how we acknowledge it as a space of universal belonging where we are transformed by God's grace, impacts the faith of even the tiniest of our crew. This is why we dunk our young ones (and sometimes our older ones) in the waters of baptism. This is why we remember where we came from by making the sign of the cross in ashes on our foreheads in Lent. This is why we come together as one body and celebrate a meal at this Table. Faith is the place in which we name, collectively, the horrors of this world, where we name the un-Jesus-like moments, where we question the meaning of faith and life and death, and it's where we hoist our little ones up in our arms and claim that, even still, there is hope. From the oldest to the youngest, faith binds us because humanity is in our blood and so is God.

Jesus' faithfulness to the woman as he sees her and sees her faith reflects God's faithfulness to us. There is an inbreaking of God into the world through Christ in this story that reveals the depth of God's commitment, faithfulness and love to each and every one of us. And the beauty of being one family in faith is that even when we don't feel grounded, even when we feel like we cannot believe, we stand on the shoulders of giants who believe for us.

Can you imagine this woman returning to her daughter after leaving the feet of Jesus? She runs home, I think, to see if the words of Christ are true. She finds her healed daughter, wraps her in her arms,

and tells her the story of Jesus, of finding a place of belonging in Christ.

“Your faith made me well, Mama?”

“No baby, *our* faith.”

Amen.