

Session 5—Grow

Following Christ by seeking, challenging and learning together

Principal Text: Matthew 15:21-28

Supportive Texts: Mark 7:24–30; John 6:26-58

We will consider:

- How to remain strong when others try to reduce our self worth.
- The work of redeeming difficult texts to liberate us for mission.
- The bread of life God promises for all.

Hymn Suggestion: (*Found in Evangelical Lutheran Worship*) “O Christ, the Healer, We Have Come,” #610.

Prayer (*Spoken by the leader*)

Loving God and saviour of all, you beckon us with outstretched arms and a gentle touch. You wipe every tear, heal every disease and remove every pain in body, mind and soul. Help us to draw near to you without fear or reservation, knowing and trusting that you will lead us into secure places and feed us with your own body and blood. In your great compassion instill in us the faith that would make us well. In Jesus’ holy name we pray. Amen.

Introduction

We are shifting the focus of our Bible study from the women in the genealogy of Jesus to two women who are known for their faith and faithfulness; one is a gentile woman known as the Canaanite or the Syro-Phoenician woman. Her story is told in two of the gospels, Mark and Matthew. While Mark highlights her persistence as the key to the healing of her little girl, Matthew emphasizes her faith.

In this passage, Jesus withdraws with his disciples to the gentile territory of Tyre and Sidon, belonging to the Canaanites. This is not an insignificant act. The Phoenicians were descendants of the Canaanites.

Tyre and Sidon were the two main Phoenician cities just north of Mount Carmel on the coast. Their presence in the land was a strong threat to the purity of Israel’s religion and morality. So there is a long history of spiritual and military conflict between the Israelites and the Canaanites. However, during the reigns of David and Solomon, Hiram, the king of Tyre was a friend of David’s and supplied Solomon with craftsmen to build the great temple in Jerusalem. By Jesus’ time, the country of Canaan had been taken over by the Greeks.

Read Matthew: 15: 21-28

If ever there was a text that preachers like to avoid, this would be one of them! It is considered one of the problem texts because it is a bit unsettling to learn that the words of Jesus in this text do not match our perception and understanding of Jesus Christ as a kind, gentle, compassionate and caring redeemer who reaches out to all and who, even on the cross graciously forgives the very people who crucified him.

How Then Shall We Live? Following Christ in a Broken World

Many attempts are therefore made to redeem the text or to redeem Christ from the text by offering interpretations. Some women theologians point out that, while Jesus is fully God, he is also truly human and therefore it is understandable that he has to be prodded by the woman to expand his vision that salvation was limited to the Jews. Some preachers try to explain that the term ‘dog’ in Greek is an affectionate term used for a cute little puppy which everyone would adore. Still others suggest that Jesus uses harsh words to test how strong her faith is.

“The woman [comes] crying out to Jesus, ‘Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.’ Her words are significant, given Matthew’s description of her as a Canaanite. She is well aware of the ancient rivalry between the Jews and the Canaanites. She believes he is the promised Messiah; but if that is true, then he is to her a Jewish king, “Son of David.” As such, he is sovereign over her and her land, and all she can do is cry for mercy. Her words open the old wounds. But she [is] desperate for her daughter, and so would cry out for mercy from the visiting Jewish king.”¹

In the previous chapters of Matthew we encounter Jesus offering extraordinary ministry among the people; preaching, healing, performing miracles. He also confronts the Pharisees and the scribes, correcting their perceptions and practices, which only upset them further.

Matthew wrote the gospel for the Jews and was by this time tracing the movement of Jesus away from the Jewish people, whose leaders were actively rejecting him, toward the lost world of the Gentiles. This is symbolic and prophetic move as the focus shifts from the small Jewish inland lake to a representative of a people to whom the sea was a highway to the world. This desperate woman represents the countless millions from the Gentile world.

While the Jews reject him, the Gentile woman understands, accepts and addresses Jesus as ‘the son of David,’ the long anticipated Messiah. Her expression of faith is so different from the critical unbelief of the rulers and the limited vision of Jesus’ own disciples.

The story of Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman broke the popular myth of that time that the Messiah was for the Jews and emphatically underscores that God’s healing grace is accessible to all. It further emphasizes that all who need healing can come before Christ as we are, without pretensions of some special knowledge about him.

Discussion

1. What does this story say to you, as a woman (or a man)?
2. What does this ‘foreign’ woman’s faith say to us about our own ‘right’ to healing?
3. What does this story instruct us to do as evangelists in our own communities, in our country, in our world? Where is the Gospel to be proclaimed? How are we a part of that?

¹ Ross, Allen. “The Faith of a Canaanite Woman (Matthew 15:21-28).” Bible.org. March 18, 2010.

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Closing Activity

As a community of faith, remembering that Jesus is present in and through the bread and wine, administer the Holy Communion to one another in a circle by dipping the bread in the wine. As the bread is shared, let the one who offers the bread say ‘this is the body of Christ broken for you’ and let the receiver of the bread say ‘and by his wounds I am healed.’

(Adapted from Isaiah 53:5)

Closing Prayer (*An extemporary prayer may be offered by any member of the group.*)

Memory verse: John 6:51

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”