

Sermon on Matthew 15:10-28
11th Sunday after Pentecost, August 16, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace...

Well, this past week has been very interesting, full of ups and downs, political shenanigans, thunderstorms, amid a pandemic. But one of the highlights of the week for many was the selection of Senator Kamala Harris as candidate for Vice-President of the United States by Presidential candidate Joe Biden. Regardless of your political point of view, her selection was noteworthy, as the first African-American woman of color to be selected as a vice presidential candidate. Ever. But it's more complicated than that. Her background is a combination of immigrant parents from Jamaica (her father) and India (her mother), a combination of Baptist Christian and Hindu religions, and she is married to a white Jewish male. This is consistent with the multiple ethnic and faith backgrounds of most Americans. Of course, some have challenged her "American" heritage because both her parents were immigrants – and not native-born, "white" Americans (I presume), but they were both American citizens when she was born, in Berkeley, California. So she is a lot like the growing majority of Americans today, a combination of ethnicities, colors and faiths, which so many of us can relate to. She reminds me of my own daughters and son in that respect. I guess you might say she has this in common with the Canaanite woman who is the "protagonist" in the gospel story today, who challenged the main character in the entire gospel, Jesus of Nazareth, a Jew who lived in a land of Jews, Gentiles, and Canaanites – ruled by Greeks and Romans, in the first century.

So who can forget the "challenge" Senator Harris gave to the soon-to-be presidential nominee Joe Biden in the first democratic presidential candidate debate. Remember that? When she raised the issue of busing school children in the 1970s, an issue he didn't fully support back then, and she said "I don't think you are a racist, but I was that girl" – bused from her home in Oakland to a school in a more affluent, white neighborhood. She was a child amidst the controversy over busing and the separate but unequal system of education in America. It was an uncomfortable, tense moment of exchange, with a woman of color challenging a white male presidential candidate of privilege. Well, months later the tension between them seems to have been resolved, because they are now on the same presidential campaign team, but you must admit that it seems a miraculous result! Joe didn't get mad or get even; he picked her as his nominee. Now, I share this as an example of how "real" the tension must have been when a Canaanite woman in the gospel story challenged Jesus, a male Jewish rabbi, when he tried to avoid

answering her cries for mercy and healing for her daughter. She persisted in challenging Jesus, in front of his disciple, and the crowd.

So about that Canaanite woman: who was she? She is not named. We hear a lot about Canaanites in the Old Testament, the people who lived in the land of milk and honey God had promised, that the Israelites entered and took as their own. They were people who lived like “strangers in their own land”, in the region of Tyre and Sidon, two cities along the Mediterranean coast where Jesus was walking. All we know is that she was a mother, whose daughter was tormented by a demon, who must have heard about Jesus’ healing and exorcism powers. She was vulnerable, and at her wits end. As Jesus passed by, from out of the crowd, this woman called out to him “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!” She asked Jesus for mercy for her daughter, and laid her pain out on the line for all to see. She asked for help, because she had no other options, as a “foreigner” in her own land, a woman who could get no one else to help her. But she was persistent in the face of many rejections, refusals and insults, because like most any parent and mother, her child’s survival was at stake. So she wouldn’t take “no” for an answer. She had a comeback for Jesus’s act of first refusal (“why should I help you? You are not a Jew.”)

But the woman, who is really the hero of this passage (not Jesus!), has the best line in the whole story. For when Jesus said, “Why should I help you? I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, it’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”. She responded, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” Wow. Good answer! She demanded healing for her daughter, even though she wasn’t the focus of Jesus’ mission, how about a “table scrap”? Jesus was impressed, and said “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!” And her daughter was healed instantly, just like that! Don’t you wish it always were so easy? But it wasn’t easy – we don’t know about how many times this mother had tried to get help for her daughter and come up empty, or asked and was refused! But now, finally, her persistence paid off! Jesus called it “faith”! We just wish we could see the joy on her face!

Now, about us. Many of us can see this side of Jesus in ourselves, and we don’t like it. His initial refusal to the woman who cried out to him for help bothers us, because he didn’t answer her at all, and his disciples encouraged him to “send that woman away”. Where was the compassionate Jesus we know? But she was annoying, and kept shouting at them, “Jesus, have mercy on me!” It reminds us of how we are annoyed when people ask things of us that we don’t want to give, and we wish they would just go away and leave us alone. Like that annoying man at the freeway exit holding the cardboard sign, saying, “Anything helps. God bless you.” Can’t we just exit the freeway and get on with our lives in peace? I can’t help you, man, I don’t carry cash! That’s our response.

But some of you may relate to the Canaanite woman, who asked Jesus for mercy. She had a daughter, tormented by a demon, an illness that no one understood, for which there was no help. She was at her wits end, and Jesus was a last resort, her only hope (like *Obe-wan-kenobe* in *Star Wars*). Have any of you had a sick child, whose illness is beyond your ability to help? You can get frantic about that, and frustrated when nobody in the medical system seems to understand, or is willing to help. And then, when you reach out for help, they look at you like you are from Mars, if you are from a different culture, or just because you are a woman, they don't have to take you seriously. Like asking someone to fix your car at the car dealership – you say the car has this problem, you ask them for help, and they look at you like you are a fool, or worse, they look away and ignore whatever you say. I don't know a lot about this because I am a white male with privilege. But I have witnessed it, though I have been culturalized into not noticing. People usually listen to me, or at least answer me, when I go to the auto shop with a car problem, even when I don't know anything. But I hear that many women just have to deal with disrespect from the males (and females) in authority all the time, wherever they go. It's no wonder that women get angry and frustrated – and it doesn't help when we men tell them to “Just calm down. You're over-reacting!” Nope. But even when no one responds with help, women still have to go home with their child and just deal with it. With persistence, inner strength or faith.

So this year in 2020 we are becoming more aware of women and their stories, especially women of color who have been elected by their communities to represent them in Congress. But there have been hundreds – no thousands, millions of women who have not given up, who have persisted in their faith over the centuries. People like Mary Magdalene in the time of Jesus to the present day, women like Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Rosa Parks who have persisted to demand justice and healing for their communities. When their demand is strong and persistent and cannot be denied or ignored, powerful men are often speechless and frustrated, so they may react with violent acts or hurtful words. Like the congressman who called New York Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez an “f-ing b-word” on the steps of the U.S. Capitol but could not bring himself to admit it or apologize. There are those who spread hateful rumors about women seeking power or political office, or make up racist “birther” lies about a vice-presidential candidate named “Kamala”, that she's not “really American” (i.e. “white male”).

It can be more personal than that, of course. You and I certainly know people like this Canaanite woman, who have children they love who are greatly challenged by health or school issues, who run up against roadblocks all the time at their school, health clinic or social service agency, often because of poverty, race or their gender. Some come to the church – I used to meet them almost daily

before covid. And I didn't always listen. I admit that sometimes I want them to "go away" when I don't have an answer or solution to their cry for help.

How about you? Do you identify with this woman asking for help? Or with the disciples (the Church) that advises Jesus that the "best thing to do" is ignore this woman's pain and send her away? What is our responsibility and calling? As the Canaanite woman in scripture show us by her example, when there are roadblocks to health and survival, when the simple answers don't come, persistence plus faith is the path to healing. You and I are called in baptism to have faith, to follow Jesus. This is not an invitation for "men only" – a point that it has taken the Church a millennium to re-learn, since the days that Mary Magdalene was sidelined after Easter. The invitation to follow Jesus is for every child of God. Some may throw roadblocks, potholes or walls across your path because of your gender, race, or background, and life events may "push back". But the Spirit of God is calling you, to be persistent, to hold on to faith, stay on the path, one foot ahead of the other, a step at a time. We may ordain women now in this Church, but we have a long, long way to go.

You and I live in challenging times for the Church and in our world. It is easy to become frustrated or discouraged, by systems of injustice and privilege that have so long needed dismantling. We cannot meet in person to encourage one another in our faith as we wish, for safety's sake. We worry about our children and grandchildren and what lies ahead. But now is not the time to give up – it is a good time to be the Church, though in a different way. As the prophet Isaiah said, *"Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance shall be revealed... Thus says the Lord, who gathers the outcasts, and others besides those already gathered."* The word today is not "I give up", but "Lord, have mercy on me!" Let us take our cue from this Canaanite woman and call upon our Lord Jesus for strength, for faith, for healing – for ourselves, and for the world! For he has promised to hear us and be with us, to the end of the age. For with the Psalmist we say: *"May God be merciful to us and bless us all; may the light of God's face shine upon all of us.... May God give us blessing, and may all the ends of the earth stand in awe."* (Ps 67) Thanks be to God.