

The Syrophenician Woman

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Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left that place, and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting:

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David – my daughter is tormented by a demon”

But he did not answer he at all. And his disciples came and urged him saying

“Send her way, for she keeps shouting after us.”

He answered

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

But she came and knelt before him, saying:

“Lord, help me.”

He answered,

“It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

She said

“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.”

Then Jesus answered her

“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!”

And her daughter was healed instantly.

(Just before the sermon, take blazer off, turn it inside out, put back on)

Allow me to introduce myself My name is Anna - and I want to tell you about the day that changed my life. Turned it upside down and inside out in fact.

You may be wondering why this jacket that I'm wearing is inside out - well, its hard to explain.., but the woman I met that day (what day? I'll tell you in a minute) the woman I met that day really had such n effect on me that I felt everything had been turned completely inside out... and ever since that day I've always worn at least one article of clothing inside out. It might seem silly to you - but its important to me. Often people ask me “why is your jacket on inside out” and then I get to tell them the story, you see - and if no one asks, it at least helps me remember.

It's not something I would ever want to forget. I'm glad Matthew wrote about that day so that people in every generation since can read about it, as you just did this morning. If I had been writing it, I would have done it a bit differently, but all in all Matthew did a fine job.

I feel I can say that because Matthew and I were friends. I haven't told you that part yet, have I? I'm Anna - and I was one of Jesus; followers - a disciple of the man from Nazareth. I had heard him preach in my home town... and I saw how he cared about people, and how he treated them - how he didn't care about things that made a difference to others... like how much money you had, or whether or not you were from the right family, or even how religious you were. He just genuinely cared.. and I felt that day I heard him speaking about God, as though somehow in his eyes and in his touch and in his being - as though God's very own presence was there. Among us. In Him. Through Him.

It's all so hard to explain - but others felt it too, and we all became his followers. It was as though God the creator, the mystery that moves the sun and the stars the Lord of Hosts - God Almighty - was somehow fully present in Jesus of Nazareth. And I felt drawn into the circle of those who sensed it too.

We followed Him and listened..., he talked and talked to us and with us, listening too, and hugging or touching when we needed reassurance. It wasn't always easy - his teachings were hard to understand sometimes, and when I did understand, it was often even harder because I knew I had to & something about it.

But we were together, those of us on the inside, and that made it easier somehow. And more people were joining us every day. It always made me feel good, when someone new joined us, to be able to help out - show them around, explain how we worked, this circle of ours. I had never felt that way before: secure - as though I really belonged. I was in charge of lodging. When we'd travel from town to town, Jesus, the twelve, and the rest of us, we had to stay somewhere at night... sometimes we stayed outside in the fields, but other times we needed something more, and I was in charge of that part of the arrangements.

I felt so good about that - trusted, and responsible... Jesus really had confidence in me - and to be inside a group like that - well - it was the best thing that had ever happened to me.

Some of the men in the group resented me at times - in my day women weren't often listened or talked to, never mind given positions of authority - but Jesus was always different that way. The other women and I were really part of that group. We were really on the inside. It was amazing! It was wonderful.

Well - that's how it went. Days of traveling and preaching and teaching - nights of talking and singing and laughing with Jesus - always inviting more and more people inside. And then came the day I'll never forget. Jesus had just finished talking to us about what it is that makes a person clean or unclean. Matthew wrote that down too:

15: 1, 2, 17-20

*Then the Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said
"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat."*

Then he said

"Are you also still without understanding? Do you now see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

The next thing we knew, we were following him to Tyre - Gentile country. Where they don't keep our religious rules at all It was hard for me to choose a place for everyone to stay - and hard for those who had to arrange for the food. Our faith taught us certain things about washing, about what foods to eat and how to prepare them. Many of our company were very faithful about that - so when he talked about what goes into the mouth....did he mean it just didn't matter?

I was so confused - and I resolved to talk to Jesus about it, before I made any arrangements about

a place to sleep that night. I was on my way to do just that when it happened. Just as I saw him standing in the centre of a small group of people, teaching the twelve and a few more, His back was to me, I saw a woman push her way through to where he was. I could see her face, not His. She was terrified, I could tell that by the look in her eyes - and yet terrified of what, I couldn't tell. She wasn't one of us - definitely not Jewish, and when she spoke it was with a heavy accent. It wasn't often that a Gentile - a foreigner - broke into the centre of a group where a rabbi was teaching his disciples. Unheard of really. No wonder she was afraid. She was also determined, though. I could see that.

As though something stronger than her fear were pushing her ahead.

As she grew closer, I recognized her as a woman from the town we had just entered. Earlier in the day I had gone for a walk through the town to sort out Jesus sayings about clean and unclean, when I happened upon a family argument. A woman and her daughter. The daughter was - oh maybe - 13, and defiant, as children can be at that age. They were both screaming at each other, and finally the daughter had slammed the door and left. I hadn't understood a word they said, but that scene? That is universal.

I had hurried off, embarrassed to have witnessed such a private family quarrel - but not before I saw the mother cover her face and begin to weep, cradling a doll that I guessed had belonged to the girl when she was a baby.

And now here she was, seeking out Jesus. Her eyes betrayed her tears of earlier in the day, and there was at once incredible strength and a terrible fragility about the way she held her body. As she stepped into the circle, some of the disciples backed away involuntarily... her clothes smelled of the food she had been cooking... foreign food: spices that smelled strange to us and foods that we had been taught were unclean.

She noticed them wrinkling their noses and backing away, but she steeled herself and kept on. You could see she'd expected that reaction - maybe our people had made her feel that way before. It hurt her, but she clenched her teeth (and her soul) and kept on.

She spoke in our language - not her own - and her accent was heavy.

"Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David - my daughter is severely possessed by a demon."

Her daughter? The one she'd fought with earlier, whose doll she had clutched, weeping - as if remembering a time when the child loved and needed her so overtly... I didn't know, but I kept listening.

What would Jesus say?

I waited - a minute, two, three, - it seemed forever. He didn't say a word. Not a word. It was horrible - the silence - like the silence before a storm or something even greater. She looked right at him the whole time. Her eyes never wavered. Still the silence. Finally, a few of those around him, embarrassed by the silence, closed the circle even tighter... very close to him in a whisper they asked Jesus to make her go away.

She stood her ground - in the silence of that circle that had tried to shut her out.

Then he spoke - and at first I thought I hadn't heard correctly. But no - that's what he said.

"I was sent only the lost sheep of the house of Israel".

The words stung me. They stung her too - I could see that... but now there was something else on her face - whatever it was, gave her the courage to ask again.

Lord help me.

Again the words - unbelievable, and harsh.

"It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

This time it was almost as though she were ready for him.

"Yes Lord - yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

At that he burst out laughing - a surprised delighted, and genuinely appreciative laugh. He walked with her - touched her - a touch of respect and admiration - and said,

"Woman - great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire."

The woman thanked him, they exchanged some comments I couldn't hear - and then she left - I watched her - and when she got to the edge of where my vision reached (by this time the circle of us around Jesus had frayed some around the edges) - just as she was about to go out of my sight she fell into the amazed embrace of what looked very much like a fourteen year old girl who had been watching from a distance.

And that's the end of my story. That's how it happened. I still am not use exactly what happened - I don't think I'll ever understand it all. But I know it was very important. Why, for example, did Jesus speak so rudely to her?

Because Jesus' back was to me while he spoke, I asked some of my friends, who were on the other side of the circle facing. Some said that all the while he spoke he had a twinkle in his eye - as if he knew she liked to argue and was trying to coax it out of her - a debate - rabbi to rabbi, in the old style.

Some said no - that he seemed to be saying

"Some of these folks here think I should only minister to Jews and would call you a Gentile dog - what do you and I have to say to that?"

Some said he was silent to see what his disciples would say and how they would react - to see if what he had just finished teaching them about things clean and unclean would influence them - had really sunk in.

I don't know. Why he was silent - why he spoke as he did - but I do know this: I know that women, whose name I don't even know - was incredibly brave. She was an outsider in every way - and it took her and her courage to teach us all a lesson. Where are the outsiders here?

Where is the church - your closed in little circle - being challenged and taught by those on the outside?

I would urge you to listen and learn. Outsiders have much to teach you by their questions, their persistence and their raw need. I would encourage you to try to be aware (more aware than you are, I know these are not new ideas for you and you have done brave and faithful work in this way until now) of when your circle is becoming too closed and too tight - thank God for those who, with brazen tenacity, push their way in and open it up. Who are you, even unintentionally, keeping out? Maybe you need, as we did, a lesson from this woman about inside and outside. For me, she turned them around.

He called her a dog. I've noticed that women in your day are still called dogs (or a variation of the word) when they ask forthrightly for what they need.

Thank God there are women who have not been beaten by the language that has been used to deny them personhood - that makes them trivial, invisible and appendices to men. Thank God that there are those who have not given up and who stay, demanding from the body of Christ the integrity of its words and actions. They are the daughters of this woman. And thank God for the men whose faithfulness and listening to the Spirit has led to mutuality, equality and sharing of power. They are the sons of this woman.

Just one more thing. What ever else my friends said Jesus' motives were that day - I believe that she taught him something by her forthrightness, her gumption and her persistence, I believe she freed Him to see His mission in a new way... or to see in a concrete way what His mission meant.

And He allowed himself to be taught - and he delighted in it! He laughed and enjoyed the new light she brought to the situation. And this I believe - is not evidence of his weakness or humanity, BUT EVIDENCE, RATHER, OF HIS DIVINITY. It was precisely Jesus' openness to this woman that is a mark of his divine nature - that makes him God-like.

Sister Corita once said that the most theological of all words is "WOW!" I have no idea what he said to her afterwards as they talked and laughed, but I believe among other things he said "Wow - you're right". If he can say that in response to the insight of a poor, desperate, marginalized foreign woman, than the heart of Jesus is very close to the heart of God. Open. Changing. Profoundly responsive to need. Delighting in those who will challenge for justice.

And so you see why I wear my jacket inside out today. It is to always remind me of the Syrophenician Woman and what she taught us, and how she turned my ideas inside out. She also turned our tight little circle inside out because before - we were always inviting others inside but never admitting that those who were "outside" might have something to teach.

And so who really I on the inside and who's outside? I don't know anymore - and that's good.

And that's God.

Amen.