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Our Saviour/St. Stephen
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, the story we have here in the gospel reading today, about this Canaanite woman, is a troubling story for many.

It is troubling story because in this story Jesus initially all but dismisses the woman, even so much as insulting the woman by calling her “a dog.”

Now some might say, “Well, that pejorative term wasn’t the same back then as it is today.”

But no, calling someone a dog back then really is no different from calling someone a dog today.

And some have tried to soften the insult by saying the term here actually should be defined as “little dogs,” like it is some sort of cute nickname, as opposed to an insult.

But no, I don’t see that either; it is a belittling expression no doubt.

And again, some might say, “Well, Jesus was trying to elicit a reaction from the woman, and that is why he uses this term.”

Perhaps.

Regardless, a lot of preachers would rather not deal with this text, because it is uncomfortable.

Jesus does not come across in the most favorable light.

PAUSE

But, I would have us not so much consider Jesus in this text as consider the woman, because this woman’s actions have had a most profound effect on the present day church.

And so, keeping that in mind, what do we know about this woman?

Well, first off, she is described as a Canaanite.

And she lives in the district of Tyre and Sidon, which were cities on the Mediterranean Coast, in the region of Phoenicia, located north and west of the Sea of Galilee.

That is significant, because what that tells us is that she lived outside the Jewish area.

And so, this woman, this Canaanite, this resident of Phoenicia, is a Gentile.

She is not Jewish.

And this is what Jesus means when he says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to dogs."

The reference to "the children's food" means that Jesus' mission and ministry is to the Jewish people.

And that is what we have seen up to this point in Matthew's gospel.

Jesus has been ministering to Jews, to the lost sheep of Israel.

But, then this Canaanite woman suddenly appears, who starts shouting at Jesus and the disciples.

And she apparently did not let up, because the disciples are at their wits' end, and they tell Jesus to send her away.

It is a classic example of the phrase, "the squeaky wheel gets the oil," no?

And so then we get this exchange between Jesus and the woman.

Jesus says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

She replies, "Lord, help me. My daughter has a demon. And she is in anguish."

And then Jesus says, "It is not right to take the children's food and throw it to dogs."

And her rebuttal is, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

And subsequently, we see something that is most MOST unusual in the Bible.

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

Did we see that? Jesus heals her daughter.

I think we missed it, so let me say it again.

The woman pesters Jesus. Jesus rejects her initially. The woman continues to argue her point. And Jesus concedes and heals her daughter.

Aww, I think we are still missing it, so let me break it down once more.

The woman shouts and shouts some more. Jesus tells her that his mission is only to the lost sheep of Israel, not to the Gentiles.

The woman persists, debating with Jesus. And Jesus, Jesus capitulates and heals her daughter.

In short, Jesus changes his mind.

And this, friends, this is most MOST unusual in the Bible.

God very rarely changes God's mind. God very rarely has second thoughts. God very rarely thinks twice.

Consider, for example, the prophets of the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, for instance, the belief was such that when the prophet came on the scene and declared the word of the Lord...

When a prophet came on the scene and proclaimed the judgment of God against God's people, because God's people has done what was evil in the sight of God...

When a prophet came on the scene and announced God's wrath, that proclaimed word was as good as gold.

That proclaimed would go forth and accomplish what it declared.

And the best that the people of God could hope for is that God would spare a remnant of the people.

But that prophetic word could not be retracted.

It was out there and nothing could hold back its power to do what it declared.

And that is why the Story of Jonah is so powerful.

Jonah, remember, was told to go to Nineveh and prophesy.

But when Jonah proclaimed God's Word against the Ninevites, who were the enemies of Jonah and the enemies of God's people the Israelites.

When Jonah proclaimed God Word against the Ninevites, such that they were to be destroyed, what happens?

The Ninevites repent, and God changes God's mind and does not bring about the destruction of Nineveh.

God changes God's mind.

And this is why the Story of Jonah is such an amazing story.

We get caught up in the detail about the giant fish swallowing Jonah, but what is really amazing about this story is that God changes God's mind.

This was unheard of in the prophetic tradition.

The prophet was supposed to declare God's judgment, and God's judgment would inevitably come to pass.

But not in the story of Jonah.

The Ninevites are spared, because God changes God's mind, and this REALLY upsets Jonah because God was supposed to smite the enemies of the Jewish people.

But Jonah knew God could be like this, that God could change God's mind, but he is not one iota happy about it.

Yes, this is most MOST unusual in the Bible. God rarely changes God's mind.

But, in our gospel reading, here we get another example of God, in the person of Jesus Christ, changing God's mind.

And, this is why I really love this story, for it is because of this Canaanite woman's persistence and debating ability that Jesus changes his mind.

And Jesus heals the woman's daughter.

And from this point on in Matthew's Gospel, the mission and ministry of Jesus is opened up, is broadened, to include Gentiles.

In fact, shortly after this scene in Matthew's gospel, Matthew includes a second miraculous feeding of a multitude.

Earlier Jesus had multiplied loaves and fish to feed five thousand men, besides women and children.

And now Jesus will go on to multiply loaves and fish to feed four thousand men, besides women and children.

Why two miraculous feedings? Because the first was for the Jews and the second is directed toward the Gentiles.

Jesus is ministering now to both Jews and Gentiles.

PAUSE

In essence, we should note that all of us would not be here if it were not for this Canaanite woman.

For how many of us here are of Jewish descent?

No? Then each and every one of us has this Canaanite woman to thank for extending the gospel beyond the lost sheep of Israel to include you and me, Gentile.

PAUSE

And notice this Canaanite woman is not even given a name in the story.

Did not one person think to ask the name of this woman so as to include it in the story?

For you know, it would have been nice to have known her name in order to have at least some Christian churches named in her honor.

We have enough churches like St. John, St. Luke, St. Peter, St. Mary.

But it would have been nice to name at least one church after the woman who is responsible for all the Gentile believers in the world.

Maybe, but I don't know for sure, but maybe there is at least one church out there in the world called, "The Church of the Canaanite Woman."

If there isn't, there should be.

PAUSE

The point being, God does change God's mind, and thank God that God does, because notice when God changes God's mind, it is then that the grace of mercy and compassion is extended in powerful ways.

Think of about the mercy and compassion that was extended by God toward the Ninevites, when God thought twice and decided NOT to rain down his wrath upon them.

Think about the mercy and compassion that was extended to the daughter of the Canaanite woman, when Jesus had second thoughts and decided NOT to ignore her, but instead to respond to her persistence.

Think about the mercy and compassion that has been extended to us, when God decides NOT to count our sins against us each and every day of our lives, but changes God's mind and instead chooses to forgive us.

Think about the mercy and compassion that comes from second thoughts, from thinking twice.

PAUSE

Now, I don't know why God decides to change God's mind; does God evolve somehow over time?

Nor do I know why the Bible writers began to see God as one who does change one's mind; did theology evolve somehow?

I don't know why that started happening.

Did God maybe begin counseling God's self?

Did God say to God's self, "You know, God, you could really ease up on your people. You could reconsider your actions"?

I don't know. I don't know why the change. Did God start to listen to God's self and so rather than act impulsively, did God begin to start counting to 10 before responding? "One, two, three..."

Personally, I like to believe that God does evolve, that God did change, because like we human beings who change in our relationships, so too does God change in his relationship with us.

Whatever the reason, how ever it came to be, what we see is that even God can change, does indeed change.

And if God can change, so then should we. So should we.

Maybe we change our minds in terms of how we are acting toward our children or our spouse.

Maybe we change our minds in terms of how we relate to our neighbors with whom we have a grudge.

Maybe we change our minds in terms of how we behave toward our sister or brother in Christ.

Maybe we change our minds in terms of how we care for the environment, or care for the homeless and destitute, or care for the disenfranchised, the alienated, the underprivileged.

All I can say is that again if change is good enough for God, then, yes, it is good enough for us.

If God can change God's mind, so should we.

And when we do change, as we see in the examples of the Bible, mercy and compassion are, or should be, the result.

Thanks be to God...Amen.