

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 15:21-28

**"Why Me?"**

In today's Gospel, Matthew paints a picture of a Jesus that can at first glance make you somewhat uneasy, and uncomfortable. The Jesus I know is: The Good Shepherd; The loving teacher; The Healer who would reach into broken lives and make them whole; the Son of God who came to earth to die for our sins. Everything I've ever read about Him in the Gospels speaks of a tender and loving Savior who gave all He had for each one of us. But in this Gospel reading we seem to be seeing an entirely different Jesus. On the outside, He appears to be harsh, callous, uncaring. Here is a grieving mother who comes to Him seeking help. And what does Jesus do?

- First, He ignores her.
- Then, Jesus tells His disciples that His ministry is ONLY for the lost sheep of Israel.
- And then, Jesus calls her a dog!

This is a surprising reaction to a woman – a Gentile woman. First, I want to tell you that this is not how I would expect my Lord and Savior to respond to a woman, let Alone anyone in crisis. Looking closer at this Gospel account, I realized several things:

- This was NOT the first time that Jesus has been approached by Gentiles for help. In Luke 6:17 we see Jesus right after He chose His 12 disciples - "*a great multitude of people out of all Judea and Jerusalem, and from the sea coast of Tyre and Sidon, came to hear him, and to be healed of their diseases.*" Jesus healed people from Tyre and Sidon – just like this woman - only a few months earlier.
- Matthew chapter 8, Jesus healed the servant of a Roman centurion. Romans were Gentiles just like this woman – and they were hated by almost all of the Jews, and yet Jesus didn't object to healing THAT man's servant.

THIS is the ONLY TIME, we know of, that Jesus went into the land of Tyre and Sidon, and (as far as we can tell) SHE is the ONLY person that Jesus met while He was there.

And so I want to suggest to you that Jesus went to the land of Tyre and Sidon just for THIS specific meeting with this specific woman - a Canaanite, a pagan, who was probably a worshipper of idols. Jesus had made it very clear how He felt about pagan idol worshippers! He said: "*Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the Day of Judgment, than for you.*" (Matthew 11:21-22) It was clear that Tyre and Sidon were the epitome of wickedness. They were the "sin-cities" of their day. You might say that had there been an advertising campaign back then there might have been a slogan that said: "**What happens in Tyre and Sidon - stays in Tyre and Sidon.**" It was a land filled with immorality, corruption and self-indulgence.

As we know - Jews didn't have much to do with Gentiles. A Gentile was anyone who was not born of Jewish parents. If you were a Gentile - Jews would not talk to you; they would not eat

with you; in fact, they would have hated the very idea of even doing business with you.

First century Jews had a special bath called a mikvah, which contained natural water – either spring or ground water or rain water for ritual cleansing. One of the uses was to wash off the ceremonial uncleanness of items that were purchased from Gentiles. The general attitude towards these non-Jews was that they were to be tolerated, and possibly even hated. The people even had a term to describe their feelings about the Gentiles- which translated in Greek - κύν (koo'-ohn) means “a dog.” This is not the kind of dog like Rover, Kerchak, Sammy, Spunky, Mina or even Lassie. Jews didn't give these sorts of dog's names, because they were wild, mongrels, scavengers that lived off garbage dragging it through the streets. In short, they were filthy, unclean animals. The disciples saw this woman as “a dog,” and viewed her as a worthless excuse for a human being. Even worse: she was from the land of Tyre and Sidon; she was one of the worst of all Gentiles.

So, when she comes to the house where Jesus is staying and then starts crying out for help, the disciples just want to get rid of her and they say: “*Send her away, for she is shouting out after us.*” (Matthew 15:23) They simply don't want her around. I don't know if you are old enough to remember W. C. Fields – who was famous for saying “go away little boy – you bother me!” In their estimation, she is not worthy of Jesus' attention. Now remember, these are the Chosen Disciples of Jesus Christ; Jesus selected them to be the future leaders in the church that He had come to establish. These men were going to set the pattern for what the church was going to be. They would establish the mindset for generations of believers to come; and apparently, deep within their hearts was this bigotry and hatred of people like this woman.

On the outside, these men look like they might be ready for the job of leadership. After all, they've been following Jesus for several years now; they have preached to crowds, they have healed the sick, they have cast out demons. They look like they're ready - but they're not ready!

They look good on the outside. But on the inside, they're a little like an old building that's falling apart. There's something ugly and dangerous on the inside that makes them structurally in serious need of either demolition or an extreme makeover - to make them useful to God. It is the same with these people. Jesus knows exactly what is going through His disciples' minds; Jesus knows how they view this Canaanite woman; and that is precisely why He came to the land of Tyre and Sidon.

- That is why Jesus lets this little “drama” play out as it does.
- Jesus knows *all about* this woman.
- Jesus knows of her sorrow and her pain and her need.
- Jesus know of her daughter's sorrow.
- Jesus knows that she is the very kind of person that He came to this world to help.
- Jesus loves this woman - **but His disciples don't!**

Jesus said that He had come “*to seek and to save that which was lost.*” (Luke 19:10)

We know that Jesus spent time with people who no one else wanted to have around: tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners. Romans 5:8 pretty well sums up why Jesus became man: *"God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."*

The human heart can be filled with all sorts of poisons of this world and the Apostle Paul reveals to us the nature of Jesus toward that poisoned heart. Listen to his words from his letter to Titus: *"For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis what we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of rebirth and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that being justified by His grace we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life."* (Titus 3:3-7) Boy - doesn't that hit home! Before Jesus came into our lives that is how we lived our lives - and Jesus could have left us that way; He could have totally ignored each one of us; He could have simply let us go our merry way - straight to hell; BUT Jesus did not.

This woman stood outside that house crying out, *"Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed."* (Matthew 15:22) And you know what? Jesus treated her just the way His disciples would expect a good Jewish rabbi, of that day, to; He ignored her! This is a desperate woman - a mother - pleading for her daughter and she will not be ignored! She *"bowed down before Jesus"* and kept crying out *"Lord, help me!"* (Matthew 15:25) This lady would just not give up - and her persistence was making the Disciples uncomfortable, to say the least. Oh, they had seen mothers like that in their own villages and towns; women who loved their sons and their daughters so deeply that they would be willing to do anything to protect them. They had seen pain like this before; they had seen sorrow that could not be healed, and they just wanted it to go away. It was really getting to them and they said to Jesus: *"Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."* (Matthew 15:23) But Jesus' answer was, *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."* (Matthew 15:24) Jesus, despite the pleas holds back. There is something that Jesus wants His disciples, and us, to learn from this. Jesus' response is an echo of the Disciple's inner feelings - He says: *"It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."* (Matthew 15:26) But Jesus does not say this to her as an insult to her; in fact, He did not even use the same kind of word that most Jews would have thrown at her - remember I just spoke about the Greek word κύων (koo-ohn) - the Greek word for a mongrel or wild dog, but Jesus doesn't use that. Instead, Jesus used a slightly different word which when translated in Greek: κυνάριον (kunarion) - means a little dog, or a puppy. Jesus did not say mongrel, but instead a puppy - a beloved pet! Do you see the difference here? I see my Savior. This word is used throughout their exchange! In first century Israel, people of means would keep little dogs as pets just like we do. If you love pets you know that you feed them, shelter them, you clean up after them and care for them. They are a part of the family! I can just imagine the smile on this woman's face -

because Jesus told her in a very simple way that she was loved by God. She gratefully says to Jesus: *"Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table."* (Matthew 15:27) This is just what Jesus' disciples needed to hear. They needed know that God loved even this Canaanite woman, whom they had despised; they needed to know that God's love reaches far beyond the Jews; and they needed to hear the faith of this Gentile woman acknowledged by Jesus. Told her *"woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted."* And her daughter was healed from that very hour." (Matthew 15:28) She must have been thinking at that point – "why me?"

I want to share with you about a woman who has dealt with a whole lot for the last 20 plus years. The worst things that could happen to a human being had happened to her – and I cannot even begin to go into detail. You would be shocked; I know I was. In spite of being made to feel unworthy, unwanted and unimportant in many social and family situations – she has kept an incredible faith. The first time Marilyn and I met this woman, well I had met her previously as I visited her in the hospital, but when she met Marilyn, she hid behind a table. She did not want to come out. I want you to understand that there were many long stretches of pain and doubt – even to the point on not being able to be touched or even to touch others. I have known her for 12 and a half years –and have been blessed to be a pastoral presence in her life all during that time in Tonawanda, New York, and even after moving to GA. Every time she would be blessed with a kindness or some good news – she would ask me "why me?" She would never ask this when there was bad news – she wasn't asking God "why me – why have you hit me with this illness or that illness or the tragedies that happened in her life?" But it only happened when there was good news – because she somehow felt unworthy. "Why me?"

We at St. Andrew's have been praying for her for months and her name is listed on our Sunday bulletin prayer list. Lauri-Anne has been riddled with cancerous tumors for over fifteen ears. Most recently she was told to be getting her affairs in order because her doctors were fearing for the worst. Thursday was her birthday and she was called and told that she had to go for tests at Roswell Cancer Hospital in Buffalo. Not a great way to spend your birthday, right? Well, she had some tests and then a PET scan – but was told to wait because they needed more doctors to look at the results. Finally, about 3:30 PM – the doctors called her in and told her that at this moment – she is cancer free! The way they put it to her was "you are not disease free" as she is on oxygen 24/7 – but she is "cancer free!" In a state of disbelief, she was driven home – all the while she was thinking "why me?" She could not wait to call me and joyfully exclaim the best birthday present that she has received in years – "cancer free!" I knew it was coming – I only had to wait for it while we were on the phone and she did not disappoint me – she said – "But Father, why me?" I told her that Jesus wanted her to receive the best birthday - and I asked her a question: "Lauri-Anne - how does it feel to be free?" I couldn't help but feel Jesus saying to her *"woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted."*