

***“The Supreme Religious Challenge”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Hearts Abound Sermon Series

Mother’s Day, Season of Eastertide, Sunday, May 8, 2016

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**Holy Scriptures: Matthew 15: 21-28**

Matthew 15:21-28 (NRSV)

*The Canaanite Woman’s Faith*

<sup>21</sup> Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup> 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.” <sup>23</sup> But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” <sup>24</sup> He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” <sup>25</sup> But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” <sup>26</sup> He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” <sup>27</sup> She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” <sup>28</sup> Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

***The Supreme Religious Challenge***

The native mountaineering guides in the Himalayas known as Sherpas

are intimately acquainted with the face of Mount Everest.  
The Sherpas call Mount Everest *Chomolungma*,  
and respect it as the “Mother of the World.”  
However, many of the Sherpas know this mighty mountain  
from one side – their only view is from their home  
valley.  
They have been known to respond in disbelief  
to images of Mt. Everest taken from the other sides.  
Their disbelief changes to amazement  
when they realize that something with which they  
were so familiar  
can have other sides to it.

(From Jacob Bronkowski’s Science and Human Values,  
reprinted in Christian Century, May 17, 2011)

### ***The Supreme Religious Challenge***

In Christian divinity schools across the United States and  
around the world  
seminarians are assigned Holy Scriptures by their  
professors  
and instructed to exegete the texts.  
To exegete a biblical passage  
is to thoroughly examine it from every possible angle:  
historical and cultural contexts,  
literary criticism, grammatical  
analysis,  
who wrote it and to whom,  
the theological  
message, and so forth.  
Christian students then submit 10, 20, 30 page papers  
with ample footnotes that describe in detail what their  
exegesis reveals.  
In Jewish seminaries, however,  
when a rabbinical student is handed a passage to  
exegete,  
he or she is informed to return with not one full

understanding

but with *a dozen understandings* of the  
same passage.

Rabbis in training are taught to approach the Word of God  
from a variety of perspectives, including theological  
understandings

that may be diametrically opposed.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks takes this exegetical discipline to the  
next level

when he applies it to the practice of living in  
community.

Rabbi Sacks says, "*The supreme religious challenge  
is to see God's image in one who is not in our image.*"

(*The Dignity of Difference*, p. 60)

"Only then can we see past our own reflections in the mirror  
to the God we did not make up."

(Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, p. 100)

### ***The Supreme Religious Challenge***

One day Jesus sent seventy disciples out to do ministry in his  
name.

Jesus sent them out ahead of him, telling them to travel in  
pairs,

to listen and learn and share the Good News with  
their neighbors.

According the Matthew,

Jesus was very specific about which neighbors He had  
in mind.

Jesus sent them forth, *instructing them,*

*"Go nowhere among the Gentiles*

*and enter no town of the Samaritans,*

*but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of*

*Israel."* (Matthew 10: 5b-6)

Those words would come back to haunt him when he  
travelled out of Galilee...

## ***The Supreme Religious Challenge***

*Verse 21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.*

In today's passage for prayerful guidance, Matthew informs us

that Jesus went away, walking northwest into Gentile territory,

to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

Jesus was not out for a Sunday stroll or a casual jog along a country road.

He was putting some distance between himself and King Herod.

Herod the tetrarch heard about the reputation of Jesus,  
and equated Jesus with John the Baptist,  
whom he had already put to death.

Earlier they had travelled from Nazareth to a lonely place in Galilee;

however the crowds followed him there,  
so Jesus and his disciples left Galilee  
altogether.

They journeyed to the edge of the Jewish world,  
somewhere they hoped to lay low for a while.

Surely He would not be recognized there.

They were far from King Herod and the crowds in Galilee.

They were all set to relax along the Mediterranean Sea.

Instead of fishing for people, here they could unwind and fish for dinner.

Little did they know they were about to encounter

***the Supreme Religious Challenge...***

*Verse 22 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."*

Any chance the woman from Canaan had of being helped  
was between slim and none.

Strike one: She was a Gentile, not a Jew, a Canaanite, not a Galilean.

Didn't we already hear that Jesus instructed his  
followers

to ignore anyone who was not Jewish?

Strike two: She was a woman, not a man,  
so she had no cultural or religious right to  
approach a rabbi.

Where was the husband or son or handy male rep  
to act as her intermediary to God?

Strike three: She was shouting, raising a ruckus, making a scene.

Is this how one comes near to the Messiah? Where's the respect?

Did she seriously expect that this visiting Teacher  
from down south  
would heed such an unruly display of behavior?

And yet, what probably really caught Jesus' attention  
--even more than these three swinging strikes--was  
her choice of words.

She called Him "*Lord, Son of David.*"

In Matthew nobody called Jesus Lord...except the nobodies.  
Only no-names, people of little significance to anyone of  
significance

publically recognized Him as the anointed One, the Messiah.

In Matthew it's the nobodies who call Jesus the Son of David:

nobodies like four blind men, nobodies like children  
who are shooed away,

nobodies like a nameless crowd of the lost, the  
last, and the least,  
and now a nobody like this desperate  
mother.

Yet here she was, far from Galilee, a woman from Canaan,  
identifying Jesus as the Son of David,  
spiritual heir of the greatest king in Israel's  
history.

*"Lord have mercy, help me Jesus,  
Son of David, have mercy on me, my Lord and my God!"*  
Sometimes it takes a nobody to see God with a pure heart  
and the eyes of faith.

Sometimes it takes a nobody to remind somebody  
that anybody should be loved by everybody.

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*Verse 23-24 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples  
came*

*and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps  
shouting after us."*

*He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house  
of Israel."*

Jesus was silent while all this was going on.

The disciples urged him to shun her, especially since they  
themselves

were having no success shushing and shutting her up,  
shooing her away and shutting her out from

His presence.

***Verses 25-27***

*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."*

Her supreme religious challenge was gutting it out and  
cutting through the mess.

The Canaanite woman,  
thinking first and foremost of her beloved daughter in  
need

--even though she was most likely hurt  
and very possibly dismayed by his cutting  
remark--

responded to His tactless comment with grace and wit.  
We read in the Bible in black and white and bright red letters  
that Jesus of Nazareth equated her, a female, with a  
dog.

This was nothing new; sexism is as old as the hills.

We see such disrespect today.

How many of us have borne witness to what happens  
when a woman is self-assured and outspoken,  
a force to be reckoned with: she is labeled  
aggressive;

she may even be called the B-word.

However when a man acts similarly,  
he is respected, labeled assertive, and called in for the  
promotion.

Recently a preacher friend of my wife Betty  
stood in the pulpit and told her congregation that for  
the first time

after years of faithfully serving Jesus and His  
Church

she was going to play "the woman card."

She proclaimed that she is sick and tired of being sick and  
tired

of the patriarchy, the double standards, the lower pay  
grades,

and the sexism of our male-dominated culture.  
Another good soul, this one hard at work in the corporate world,

said that she can testify from first-hand experience  
the ceiling above that limits her advancement  
is not made of glass;  
the ceiling is lined with men.

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So after she spoke, saying, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs

*that fall from their masters’ table,”* Jesus paused.

At least, I like to imagine that the Son of David paused to catch his breath

and think twice before he spoke again.

He may have been given pause,

for he’d just lost an argument yet gained some growth.

What transpired next was nothing less than spiritual transformation.

*Verses 28-30 Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith!*

*Let it be done for you as you wish.”*

*And her daughter was healed instantly. Then he said to her, “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”*

*So she went home,*

*found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.*

When Jesus called her “Woman” he was affirming her personhood,

her identity as a child of God.

No longer was she an “Other” or a dog or a heathen;

she was a mother, a neighbor, a new connection;

she was one with Him, with God, with the



whole people of God.  
This was truly a moment of unexpected grace.  
All pretenses and prejudices, divisions and differences were  
shattered,  
and in heaven the angels danced.  
In that moment of recognition, respect, and relating,  
her daughter was made whole, healed and renewed,  
filled with new possibility and hope.  
No longer was this child identified with disease and demons;  
she was defined by God.  
In this narrative she is unseen, yet we can see her smile  
across time and space.

***“The Supreme Religious Challenge***  
*is to see God’s image in one who is not in our image.”*

(The Dignity of Difference, p. 60)

“Only then can we see past our own reflections in the mirror  
to the God we did not make up.”

(Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, p. 100)

Jesus was changed, as were His followers.  
Their disbelief changed to amazement  
when they realized that something with which they  
were so familiar  
could have other sides to it.  
From that day, that moment forward Jesus and the disciples  
carried the Good News of God’s love  
to the everyone and everywhere they went.  
After this encounter with the Canaanite woman, the Gospel  
went viral.

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One of my favorite stories of the Desert Fathers and Mothers  
goes like this:

An elder living alone in the desert undertook a seventy-week  
fast.

He ate only once a week in order to be more receptive to God.  
When he was little more than bone and vapor  
    he asked God to reveal to him the meaning of a certain passage.  
God would not do it.  
The elder, disappointed by how little good the fast had done for him,  
    decided to go ask one of his brothers in Christ the meaning of the passage.  
The minute he closed the door to his home,  
    an angel appeared and said,  
*“Your seventy-week fast did not bring you one step closer to God,  
but now that you have humbled yourself enough  
to go to your brother,  
God has sent me to reveal the meaning of the passage.”*  
Then the angel told the elder what it meant and went away. (Taylor, p. 90-91)

In Barbara Brown Taylor’s book, An Alter in the World, she says:

*“The wisdom of the Desert Fathers [and Mothers]  
includes the wisdom that the hardest spiritual work in the world  
is to love the neighbor as the self  
– to encounter another human being not as someone you can use,  
    change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince or control,  
but simply as someone who can spring you  
from the prison of yourself, if you will allow it.  
All you have to do is recognize another you “out there” –  
your other self  
    in the world – for whom you may care as instinctively as  
you care for yourself.*

*To become that person, even for a moment,  
is to understand what it means to die to yourself.  
This can be as frightening as it is liberating.  
It may be the only real spiritual discipline there is.” (p. 93)  
“At the most basic level, the everyday practice of being with  
other people  
is the practice of loving the neighbor as the self.  
More intricately,  
it is the practice of coming face-to-face with another human  
being,  
preferably someone different enough to qualify as a capital  
“O” Other  
– and at least entertaining the possibility  
that this is one of the faces of God.” (p. 94)  
She goes on to gently remind us that “the world’s great  
religions  
have always required communities of people to make them  
work.  
Whether they call themselves congregations, covens,  
ummas, or churches,  
these communities are the places where  
the concrete teachings of the religion are tested.” (p. 93)  
There are other arenas in which we find ourselves  
exploring and enjoying community and  
kinship.  
Quilting circles, sports teams, social networks, chat rooms,  
trivia nights, choirs and choruses and bands, political  
committees,  
civic clubs and dinner clubs and book clubs,  
and so on.  
The challenge, of course, is  
sameness. Homogeny. Uniformity.  
A gathering together of like-minded people  
with similar convictions or commitments, ideology or  
theology,*

standards or disciplines. (p. 94, adapted)  
*“On the one hand, this is what keeps them together.  
On the other hand, this is what keeps other people out.”*  
(Taylor, p. 94)

**The supreme religious challenge** for disciples today and tomorrow

is that Jesus intends to love those who are on the  
outside looking in,  
the nobody and the anybody, the somebody and  
even everybody;  
He is sending us ahead of him to do the inviting,  
to make ready the feast, to set an extra place at the  
Lord’s Table.  
Our disbelief changes to amazement  
when we realize that something with which we are so  
familiar  
can have other sides to it.

We hear [God’s] voice [cry] out [to us]:  
*“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.  
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”* (Isaiah 40: 3-5)

*All power be to the Creator, the Son and the Holy  
Spirit. Amen.*