

“Listen to Your Heart”

Matthew 15: 21-28

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Our attention today is drawn to one of the most perplexing passages in the gospels. It paints a rather unflattering picture of Jesus, at least at the beginning. He is seen as being harsh, rude and insensitive, three words we don't normally associate with Jesus. Listen as I share the details of this fascinating story.

Jesus and his disciples have traveled north to the cities of Tyre and Sidon. These two cities were on the coast of the beautiful Mediterranean Sea in Lebanon. It appears they went into Lebanon to get away from the Pharisees who continued to quiz him on why his disciples were not following all the religious rituals these leaders deemed as measurements of holiness.

I am confident this encounter left Jesus a bit frayed and frustrated. Nothing he said to the Pharisees about what was really important to God seemed to register. Instead of doing justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with God as Micah admonished them, they preferred to measure people's spirituality by their observance of religious rituals like properly washing hands before meals.

So, to get a break from his detractors, Jesus went into Lebanon hoping to find some peace and quiet. It did not take long for this dream to be shattered.

Immediately, a Canaanite woman who must have caught a glimpse of Jesus ran toward him and began shouting at him. She pleaded for mercy because her daughter was sick. Matthew tells his readers Jesus ignored her; at least he did not answer her.

She must have continued following Jesus and creating a disturbance because the disciples urged Jesus to send her away. At their insistence, Jesus turned to the distraught woman and told her he was not sent to help Gentiles but only Jews.

Upon hearing this, the woman knelt in front of Jesus in a posture of worship and said, "Lord, help me." Again, Jesus rejected her plea for help by telling her he did not come to help anyone but the lost sheep of Israel. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the

dogs,” Jesus told her. “Dogs” was a derogatory term used by Jews to describe their contempt for Gentiles.

This cruel slur and proverbial slap on the face did not dissuade the Canaanite woman from seeking Jesus’ help. She refused to take no for an answer but offered this rebuttal. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish,” Jesus replied. According to Matthew, her daughter was healed instantly.

I told you this was a perplexing story. I think you understand now why I said that.

How does this story speak to us today? Quite frankly, at the outset it raises more questions than answers.

Was Jesus really upset with this woman or merely testing her faith? Did her persistence and arguments cause him to change his mind? Did Jesus come to a greater understanding of his mission and purpose as he dealt with the needs and appeals around him? Since this woman exhibited “great faith,” what does “great faith” look like? At the conclusion of the story, did the Canaanite woman become a disciple? Who are the Canaanite women of today?

I’ll ask some of these questions again Wednesday night when we do further study around the tables in the fellowship hall, unless you want to stay here for a couple more hours and delve into them now. I didn’t think so.

For the sake of our limited time together this morning, how does this story speak to us? For me, it serves as a lesson on making decisions, something common to all of us.

Each of us makes dozens, if not hundreds, of decisions every day. Some of these decisions are mundane but necessary. Others are much more important and consequential. This was true for Matthew’s readers, and it certainly is true for us.

What does this story teach us about decision making? Wise decisions are made with the heart as well as the head. Listen to your heart in addition to the facts. Always seek that balance, and if you do, it will change you and the world around you.

For years I have said when I put a name and face with a decision, it often changes the outcome. I can offer strong opinions about everything from scripture interpretation, moral issues or public policy just like everyone else.

However, I am never really satisfied with my ideas or opinions until I plug my theories into a real life situation. People’s stories have a way of shattering what I was absolutely certain

about, as they should. I believe Jesus discovered this during his encounter with this desperate Canaanite woman.

It appears to me Jesus meant what he said that day to this woman. He was exhausted and searching for a peaceful place where he could relax. This mother's outburst not only drew attention to her, but Jesus' presence in town. Do not think for a moment she would be the only one disrupting his quiet retreat, which Jesus quickly surmised.

In addition, I believe at this point in his spiritual development, Jesus truly believed his mission was to "the lost sheep of Israel." Perhaps he intended to broaden his scope later to include non-Jews, but not yet. He knew to befriend the Gentiles would do more than disrupt his life, it would endanger it, and he was right. His crucifixion some time later was due in large part to his refusal to limit God's grace to, as my friend, Tom Ehrich, writes, "the holiest elements of the holy tribe of Jacob."

So, I think Jesus was going to ignore this woman and walk as far away from her as he could. All that changed when he stopped and looked into her eyes and listened to her story. He could walk away from the Gentiles; he could not walk away from this particular Gentile, a woman with a tormented child. Once again, real life messed with what was perceived as a perfectly designed religion, and real life won, as it always does.

When people want to talk to me about scripture, moral issues or public policy, I have developed the habit of asking them to help me personalize the conversation. "Let's identify someone who is experiencing what you want to discuss," I say. If they are unwilling to do this, I realize this dialogue will never include the heart, only the head, something I am usually unwilling to do as a follower of Jesus.

This story teaches me something else about making decisions. I need to be willing to reconsider a decision after carefully listening to those who disagree with me. If they shed new light on the subject and help me to think about this differently, as this Canaanite woman did for Jesus, I need to change my mind.

Winston Churchill once said, "Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen." Jesus exhibited great courage and love that day by listening to a Gentile woman. He exhibited even greater courage by acknowledging that her strong faith led her to confront him and say these things to him.

The risk she was taking was equivalent to the risk he was taking by changing his mind. Both were treading on thin ice. No one in the Jewish community would have criticized Jesus for walking away from the Canaanite woman. However, there was no shortage of people who would condemn Jesus for helping her.

Throughout scripture, we see where God changed His mind. In Genesis 18, God listened when Abraham bargained for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Repeatedly, God changed his mind about destroying that wicked city while Abraham searched for enough righteous people to spare it from destruction.

Years later, Moses pleaded with God not to destroy the Israelites after they built the Golden Calf. God listened to Moses' passionate plea to spare them, which God did. Exodus 32:14 records God's change of heart with these words. "Then the Lord relented and did not bring on His people the disaster he had threatened."

Time and again, God changed his mind when prophets pleaded for mercy instead of indifference or wrath. Jesus knew this and eventually followed God's example.

What decision do you need to revisit today? Perhaps you have not included both the head and the heart in making it.

Do you need to take the time to listen to someone's story that could give you a new perspective? Are you willing to put down your defenses and listen with an open mind?

What do you think Jesus wants you to do? Ask the Canaanite woman. I have a good idea she knows.