



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent St. Matthew 15:21-28

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Imagine having a sick child. You've done everything you can think of to help her and she's still sick. And then you hear that Jesus is in town. People say he's the son of God. He's healed so many other people. I'll go and ask him for help. For the first time you feel hope. Jesus can heal her. I have faith. And so you go out and find Jesus as he and his entourage our making their way through town. You call out to him for help, but he keeps walking. Jesus' friends tell you to go away, but you keep calling out to Jesus for help. Finally, he stops, he turns to you, and he tells you that he can't help you. He wasn't sent to help you and that to do so would be like a father throwing the bread meant for his children to the dogs.

A lot of people would say that this doesn't sound very much like Jesus. Refusing to help someone in need? Calling her and her people dogs? But it's right here in St. Matthew's Gospel. Look again at Matthew 15:21-28:

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out 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." And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread 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, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

"Have mercy on me!" she says. And he responds, "I can't. You're not an Israelite. It'd be like throwing a starving child's bread to the dogs." Yes, Jesus eventually capitulates, but what's going on here? This story is often listed among the "hard passages" of the Bible. Some people have used to argue that Jesus was a racist. So what's going on here?

Matthew's main purpose in telling us this story is to point us to Jesus' mission. Matthew reminds us that Jesus didn't parachute into history to save humanity and the world at a random time and place. There's been a tendency in the Church to abstract Jesus' ministry. He's *is* the Saviour of the world after all, and so we start thinking that if he'd wanted to he could have come at any time and any place to do his saving work, but in doing that we forget that—no—he came and he had to come where and when he did because Jesus is part of a bigger story.

Some people explain away the difficulty here by saying that Jesus was testing this woman to see how persistent her faith was. It's possible. And yet he doesn't initially address her. When he says that he was sent to the lost sheep of Israel, he's reminding his disciples why his mission isn't to the gentiles, not offering the woman an explanation. It's possible that it was a test, but I think a better explanation is that that Jesus really was called to minister to the lost sheep of Israel and, over the course of his ministry so far, the massive scope of his task has set in. He's even told his disciples in 10:23 that they won't have made it through all the towns before the time is up. That's when Jesus lamented that the harvest was great, but the labourers few. His mission was to Israel. It's not that the occasional gentile couldn't be part of it, but that there just wasn't enough time. In denying this woman, Jesus was simply being faithful to his calling.

But why was Jesus' ministry so specific? "For God so loved the *world*,"

we say, and we struggle to reconcile this with that. And the reason this is troubling for us is because we've forgotten the *story*. Not this short story and not even just the story of the gospels, but the *big story*, the story of Israel, the story of the people of God that runs from Genesis to Revelation. Again, we tend to lift Jesus out of his historical and Jewish context, out of his First Century context, which means lifting him out of the story of Israel—which again means lifting him out of the Genesis to Revelation story. What our Gospel today shows us is Jesus *right in the middle of the story*.

Now, it's true: Jesus did *not* come to the gentiles. Yes, some gentiles—a few—came to him, but Jesus did not come to the gentiles. Jesus came to *Israel*. Jesus is *Israel's* Messiah. "But again," we protest, "God so loved the *world* that he gave his only begotten Son..." Yes. Jesus brings salvation for all, but we need to first understand that he does so *as Israel's Messiah*. Jesus stresses it right here: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." And in saying that he is not saying that he came to some of the house of Israel who were lost, but that he came to Israel because Israel—the whole people—was lost. They were sheep without a shepherd.

Jesus came to bring the kingdom that had been promised to Israel through Abraham and through David. There were aspects of that kingdom that were new and different, but Jesus' kingdom is built firmly and immovably on the covenant and the promises the Lord had made with Israel down through the ages from Abraham's time. He had called Israel to be his people. He had promised to be their God. He had rescued Israel and set her apart that he might show her his blessings and give her his word and he did it all *so that she could then share that blessing and share that word with the gentile nations*. Remember that Jesus stressed in the Sermon on the Mount that he had come *not* to abolish the law—not to abolish anything God had promised or covenanted or established with Israel—but to *fulfil* it. Jesus didn't come to do away with Israel. Many Christians down through history have said that because of Israel's faithlessness God cast her aside to start

over with the gentiles and the Church. No. On the other extreme you've got the Dispensationalists—very prevalent teaching in North American Evangelicalism—that has Jesus coming and putting Israel on hold while the Lord saves the gentiles and builds a Church. Eventually, they say, God will be finished with the gentiles, the Church will be completed and then “raptured” out of the world, and the Lord will then pickup where he left off with Israel. Again, no. Jesus didn't come to abolish the idea of God electing a special people, nor did he come to divide the people of God with Israel on the one hand and the Church on the other. From day one with Abraham God had made clear that his restoration of the world and his restoration of humanity was going to happen through Israel. Israel may have made a lot of mistakes, fallen into idolatry, failed to live the law, failed to be a light to the nations, but the Lord wasn't giving up. The Church isn't “Plan B” implemented when “Plan A”, Israel, failed.

Did gentiles need redemption? By all means, yes! But again, God's plan was always to work through Israel and so the ministry of the Messiah had first to be for Israel. Israel had misinterpreted the message she'd been given long before. Some in Israel had even abandoned it almost entirely. And so if Israel was going to be the Lord's means of bringing life to the world, Jesus had first to call her back to the Lord. Not to do so would be for Jesus to deny the Lord's promises and to make a liar out of him.

In fact, what we see Jesus doing—and especially so in the middle portion of the Gospels between his birth and his death and resurrection—is taking on the role of Israel himself. In Daniel the Son of Man character represented the saints or the people of God, but in Jesus' ministry we see him taking that role on, embodying it himself. In his birth and ministry we see him taking on the role of the great Davidic King. And as his ministry unfolds into rejection, suffering, and death we see him taking on the role of Isaiah's suffering servant. Again, these are roles the prophets ascribed to Israel, but one by one Jesus

takes each of them up himself. Brothers and Sisters, understand this key point: Jesus *is* Israel. He embodies her inheritance and her mission. Where Israel had failed to be faithful, Jesus is faithful without fail. Even as he dies, he faces the very same death that the Jewish revolutionaries faced a generation later and for the very same reason: he challenged Rome as King of the Jews. Jesus came as the embodiment of Israel. And he came as Israel to show God's people a new way of being Israel—a new way in which the people would fulfil everything the Lord had ever promised and everything the Lord had ever called Israel to be. This is why Jesus came preaching repentance. The people had to let go of all their misconceptions of what it meant to be God's people, whether that was their hope for violent revolution or their hope that if they were obedient enough the Lord would finally send the Messiah to rain down fire and brimstone on the gentiles and usher in the kingdom. As the promises were fulfilled in Jesus it did not nullify God's plan to bring life to the world through Israel. What it did was reorient Israel around Jesus himself—it forged a *new* Israel, not based on blood and genealogy but on faith. Israel had been born as a people when they followed the Lord in faith through the waters of the Red Sea and were rescued from Egypt. In Jesus Israel is born again. But this new Israel is born of all those who follow Jesus in faith through the waters of baptism. Jesus offered a choice. As he fulfilled the covenant those who repented and reoriented their lives in and around him—those who found their lives in him—became part of the new way of being Israel, centred in Jesus. But, Jesus warned, those who rejected him and refused him would be cut off—and when he said that he was speaking to the biological children of Abraham. The axe was set to the root of the tree. The branches that refused to bear good fruit would be cut off. Jerusalem, embodying and representing faithless Israel would be and was judged, torn stone from stone, and scattered.

But through Jesus, Israel would continue in a new way—with the law no longer

on tablets of stone, but written on her heart, with the Spirit of God no longer residing in a stone temple behind a curtain they could never pass, but actually living inside them—making them the temple themselves. And as the Spirit changed and renewed and brought to life the law of love now written on their hearts, this new Israel would finally fulfil the Lord's mission for his people—reaching out to the nations and bringing his life to the world. So, yes, Jesus came to bring life to the world—to Jew and gentile alike—but to fulfil the Lord's plan he brought this life by first bringing it to the old Israel, to Abraham's children. To do anything else would have been to bypass the Lord's plan and to make a liar of him.

This faithfulness of God to his promises—what we call the “righteousness of God”—is the theme of St. Paul's epistle to the Romans. Through the book Paul explains how God has been faithful to and how he has fulfilled his covenant promises to Israel and at the end, in Romans 15 he sums it all up, writing:

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised [that means Israel—Abraham's biological children] to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.” (Romans 15:8-9)

Jesus fulfilled God's promises to Israel so that when the story of Israel and the Lord's faithfulness to her—especially his faithfulness in Jesus the Messiah—was proclaimed to the Gentiles they would—*we* would—fall before God in worship of his great mercy. This is the story the first Jewish Christians proclaimed to the gentiles. This story of the faithfulness of God was the story St. Paul proclaimed as he travelled the Roman empire and as the gentiles heard it, they put their faith in Jesus, they were baptised into his body, and as they found their life in Jesus—the true

embodiment of Israel and the fulfilment of God's promises to her—as they found their life in Jesus the gentiles were grafted into Israel.

It's often a contentious point today in some circles, but the story we've inherited, the story told from Genesis to Revelation makes it clear that Israel is the Church and the Church is Israel and Jesus stands at the centre-point, at the bridge between them. The Jewish root that was Israel gave birth to Jesus the Messiah who is now the trunk of a tree that branches out to the entire world. Anyone who may—Jew or gentile—can take part in the life of Jesus. All any of us needs to do is take hold of him in faith, trusting that in his death he has forgiven our sins and in his resurrection has given us life. Both literally and metaphorically, Jesus provides the blood to make us Israel. All we need is faith.

Of course, getting back to our story in Matthew, at the time this Canaanite woman approached Jesus, neither he nor his disciples were ready for any of this. Jesus wasn't even ready for the cross yet, but here's this woman who is ready for Easter—ready even for Pentecost! It's remarkable. Here she is a foreigner. They meet up with her outside of Israel in a foreign land. Near Sidon was a major temple of the god Eshmun, a pagan god of healing. She may have just come from that temple with her daughter, disappointed that nothing had happened. But she hears that Jesus is in town and she goes looking for him. She'd heard about him. Not only that, she knew more about the Lord's promises to Israel—or at least she understood them better—than most people in Israel, better even than Jesus' disciples.

When Jesus told her that he had come only for the lost sheep of Israel she responded: "But even the dogs eat what falls from the children's table." She understood, she accepted that Jesus had come to redeem Israel. She understood that his mission wasn't a mission to the gentiles. That would have bypassed and undermined the Lord's covenant promises. But she was okay with that because somehow she also knew what

Israel was called to be and to do. She knew who the Messiah was and what he was called to do. She addresses Jesus as "Son of David"—his messianic title that even the disciples hadn't yet fully grasped. And she knows that if he is the Messiah, his goal is to fulfil the Lord's promises to Israel so that his greatness and his mercy will be proclaimed to the gentiles—to people like her. She somehow knows that through the Messiah, the gentiles will be able to participate in the life of Israel, in the life of God's covenant people. And so she grabs hold of Jesus in faith and insists. His mission may not be the gentiles, but that doesn't mean the gentiles can't and won't come to him.

This woman has hope because she understands what the Lord and what his kingdom are all about. She has hope because she knows what the Messiah is ushering in. And even though she's envisioning Easter—even envisioning Pentecost—while Jesus hasn't even made it to the cross, by her faith she reaches into that future and drags it into the present. Jesus sees her faith and can't help but make her daughter well.

Brothers and Sisters, each of us has reached out to Jesus through the waters of baptism—reached out in faith in order to take part in the life of Israel, in the life of God's people. By that faith—not through what we've done, not because of who we are, but by that faith—we've been grafted into the people of God, we've been made part of the body of Christ, we've been incorporated into the story. By faith we've each been given a part to play in that story and the Holy Spirit has given us fruit to bear and gifts to use as we work together as Jesus' people to preach, to proclaim, to live and to make real the story of Israel, the story of God's faithfulness to the world. God's intent is to bless—to redeem, to restore, to make whole, to make new—his world through his people. In Jesus we've seen what the kingdom of God is like. When we gather as the Church we see a glimpse of the kingdom as it will one day be. As we come to the Table Jesus gives us a foretaste of the great banquet that awaits us. All of these things are

gifts of grace. They strengthen our faith in the faithfulness of God and in that they give us hope. But, Brothers and Sisters, let us live in faith as the woman in the Gospel. Again, Jesus wasn't even ready for the cross, but she was ready for Easter. You and I live in hope of God's future, but don't stop there. Live in hope *and* faith, bearing the fruit of the Spirit in the world to make God's future a reality here and now. Live in hope *and* faith, truly living in the knowledge that Jesus is Lord, proclaiming his kingdom and making it known here and now.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of faith by which we have been grafted into your Son, Jesus, and in him grafted us into your people, Israel. We were stones, but by the gift of faith you have made us children of Abraham. We were dead wood, but by faith you have grafted us into the living vine and caused us to bear fruit. Strengthen that gift of faith we now ask, that as we live in hope of your future we would live in such a way, bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit and using the gifts you have given us, to make your future known this day in the present for all the world to see. As you're people, strengthen our faith that we might be the blessing to the nations you have called us to be, holding high the light of Christ and proclaiming boldly that Jesus is Lord. Amen.