



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“CRUMBS FROM THE TABLE”

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 15:21-28

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church, Charleston, SC, by Rev. James T. Rogers on Sunday, August 17, 2008.

It was early spring, 2006. I was finishing my seminary degree in Decatur, Georgia, and beginning to seek a specific call in ministry. After reading through forty or fifty church information forms, which are basically job descriptions that include each church's theology and statistics, I began to write letters to several churches, explaining my interest in learning more about their congregations. Each of these churches seemed to be a great fit for me theologically and their job descriptions also included a list of tasks that interested me. Some of the churches wrote back and stated that the position had already been filled. Others requested interviews. But there was this one church that sent no reply at all. No acknowledgement that I had even sent a letter. No “thanks, but no thanks.” Nothing. It was as if they didn't even have the time of day to respond to my request.

Nobody likes to be ignored or overlooked.¹ Now imagine what it must be like to be overlooked based on your physical appearance. I imagine some of you know exactly what that feels like. People overlook you based on your age: you are either too old or too young. Others are overlooked because of a physical handicap. Some people are overlooked based on the color of their skin or their gender. Right after college I applied for a youth director position at a church. After interviewing I was not offered the job. Later I was told that I didn't get the job because the search committee was only seeking a woman to fill the position. Ouch!

Thinking about our own experiences of being ignored and overlooked helps us to begin to imagine how the Canaanite woman in this story might be feeling. For starters, this woman isn't even given a name. She is simply “a Canaanite woman from that region.” No name. No specific identity. She must not be that important.

As she approaches Jesus and the Disciples she has several things going against her.² First, she is a woman. While our society is much different, in Jesus' time there were strict rules about how men and women interacted in public. It was certainly a risk for a woman to approach a man and engage him in conversation. Second, she is a Canaanite. In the Old Testament we read that the Canaanites are the ones with an evil religion – they are pagans. They are the ones who worship false idols, sacrifice children, and participate in other abominations. She is a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel. Jews and Canaanites didn't get along with one another, to say the least.

¹ Bloomingcactus: “Matthew 15:21-28 ‘Overlooked and Underconsidered,’” August 13, 2008 [http://bloomingcactus.typepad.com/bloomingcactus/2005/11/matthew_15_2128.html].

² Bloomingcactus: “Matthew 15:21-28 ‘Overlooked and Underconsidered,’” August 13, 2008 [http://bloomingcactus.typepad.com/bloomingcactus/2005/11/matthew_15_2128.html].

This woman must have felt out of place; and yet she still dares to approach Jesus. Maybe it is a sign of her desperation. Her daughter is being tormented by a demon. She has no other options. She must plead her case to Jesus. In the movie *John Q*, Denzel Washington plays the role of John Quincy Archibald, a father in a desperate situation.³ His son Michael collapses while playing baseball as a result of heart failure. He rushes his son to a hospital emergency room where he is informed that Michael's only hope is a transplant. Unfortunately, John's insurance won't cover his son's transplant. Out of options, John Q. takes the emergency room staff and patients hostage until hospital doctors agree to do the transplant. That is the kind of desperation that this woman has. She must approach Jesus.

Thank goodness she is going to Jesus for help! Even with the rigid boundaries of life that seek to restrain her, she dares to seek his healing power. He will help her; he will love her. Jesus is always welcoming of outcasts and is willing to help those who are outside the Jewish tradition. Remember the Samaritan woman at the well (she didn't get a name either). Jesus offered her living water! And there was the Roman centurion who asked for Jesus to heal his servant. Not only did Jesus perform the healing, but he said of the centurion, "I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith." And then there were the ten men Jesus healed of leprosy; only one of them returned to thank Jesus. The one who returned was a foreigner, a Samaritan. Jesus has a track record of healing foreigners, so this woman's experience shouldn't be any different, right?

And just when we think that Jesus will help this woman who has stepped out in faith against all of the odds – like the woman with severe bleeding who touched Jesus' cloak and was made well – we are slapped in the face by Jesus' reply to her requests: first, silence. Jesus chooses to ignore her. The Disciples respond, however, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting at us." Jesus finally speaks and explains his lack of sympathy; "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus is telling this woman, "You are a Gentile. My purpose involves the Jews and doesn't include you. I don't have the time or energy to deal with you or your problems." This woman pleads again, "Lord, help me." Jesus responds, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jesus is telling this woman that he will not take what is reserved for the Jews and give it to the Gentile dogs, the Gentile people. Ouch! Many times Bible passages tend to lose their bite when read in our time and society. However, these words of Jesus certainly still remain sharp to our ears.

To be fair, however, this isn't the first time that we see Jesus' preference for the Jews in Matthew's gospel. When Jesus instructs his Disciples to go out and minister and heal, they are told, "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel." Jesus understands his God given mission to redeem Israel.

But our morning's text does not end there. In an amazing turn of events, Jesus exclaims, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done as you wish." Maybe it was the persistence of the woman – her screaming, her repeated requests, her determination, or the way she fell at Jesus' feet. Or maybe it was the way she turned around Jesus' words to her, saying, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Or maybe it was her "great faith" exhibited as she addressed Jesus as Lord and the Son of David. Whatever the case, Jesus acknowledges this woman's faith and heals her daughter.

Some scholars say that Jesus knew what he was doing the whole time; this was simply a test of both the woman's faith and the Disciples' response. I disagree. The Jesus that I know wouldn't play a mind game with a woman whose daughter was suffering from a demon just to prove a theological point. That just doesn't sit well with me.

³ The Internet Movie Database, "John Q," August 13, 2008 [<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0251160/plotsummary>].

Instead, I believe Jesus' conversation with this pagan woman is a real conversation - a collision of two worlds and a collision of the future into the present. Her words help Jesus realize his ultimate calling to bring salvation not only to the Jews but also to the world. Rightfully so, his ministry begins with God's chosen people, Israel, however, this woman is correct. The salvation that is first offered to the Jews will also be made available to those who are on the outside – even the Canaanites! This is the mission that Jesus exclaims after his resurrection: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...” No longer is his focus the Jews, but salvation to the world.

How easy would it have been for Jesus to maintain the status quo – to ignore the woman and her pleas and not be bothered? That would have been easy. That would have been what the Disciples would have expected. Instead he engages her in conversation and finds faith and truth in one of the most unexpected places. As broken, fallen people, many times we choose ignore and overlook others in this world, especially those who look different than us or have different backgrounds than we have. But as followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to live differently. We are called to acknowledge and interact with all of God's children.

For the past several years I have had the opportunity to serve as a youth advisor for our presbytery's youth council. Charleston Atlantic Presbytery is a group of forty-nine Presbyterian Churches which are located all over southern South Carolina from Barnwell to Orangeburg to Mount Pleasant to Beaufort. It is wonderful to see such a diverse group of youth and adults gather for retreats at Camp Bethelwoods or for day events at one of our churches. While some of our youth have participated in presbytery events over the past few years and had an awesome time, I have heard from some parents that they are nervous about sending their kids to presbytery activities. Some ask questions like, “Why don't we plan events with the downtown churches instead.” In my mind I protest, “But those are the people we always spend time with.”

Let me tell you about story about Bill.⁴ Bill was a new Christian and a college student. He had wild hair, wore a T-shirt with holes in it, jeans, and no shoes. This was his wardrobe for his entire four years of college. He was brilliant, kind of eccentric, and very bright.

Across the street from the campus was a well-dressed, very conservative church. One day Bill decided to go there. He walked in with no shoes, jeans, his T-shirt, and wild hair. The service had already started, and so Bill started down the aisle looking for a seat. People began to look uncomfortable, but no one said anything. Bill got closer and closer to the pulpit, and when he realized that there were no seats, he just squatted down right on the carpet. He was used to doing this in his college fellowship, but this had never happened in this church before.

The people became uptight, and the tension in the air was thick. Just then, way from the back of the church an elder slowly made his way toward Bill. The elder was in his 80s, had silver-grey hair, and wore a three-piece suit. He was a godly man, very elegant, dignified, and courtly. He walked with a cane. As he walked toward Bill, everyone thought to themselves that you can't blame him for doing what he is going to do. How can you expect a man of his age and background to understand some college kid on the floor?

It took a long time for the elder to reach Bill. The church was utterly silent except for the clicking of the elder's cane. All eyes were focused on him. You couldn't even hear anyone breathing. The minister couldn't preach until the elder did what he had to do. The elder then dropped his cane on the floor. Then, with great difficulty, he lowered himself and sat down next to Bill and worshiped

⁴ Christian Reformed Church, “Mind Your Manners,” August 16, 2008 [http://www.crcna.org/pages/vanharn_luk14.cfm].

with him so he wouldn't be alone. Everyone was choked up. As the minister began, he said, "What I am about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget."

The congregation could have just ignored Bill. He was different from them. He didn't fit in. The elder could have scolded Bill for the clothes that he wore that day. He could have explained that people didn't sit on the floor in his church. That's what everyone expected the elder to say. Instead the elder acknowledged Bill's presence and even joined him on the floor. We too are called to acknowledge and interact with all of God's children. And who knows, maybe we too will find faith and truth in the most unexpected of places.