

Matthew 15: 21-28 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²Just 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." ²³But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

The disciples are annoyed today. So is Jesus. Maybe they've been travelling too much lately and are short on patience. Indeed, they have been moving around a lot. They have healed many sick people and taught them about the kingdom of God. They have fed 5,000 people and Jesus has walked on water. And now they are in the district of Tyre and Sidon, which is an area where Gentiles lived. Gentiles were considered to be outsiders, and some considered them to be pagans.

And that is when they become annoyed. There are crowds as usual. That isn't the annoying part. What is annoying has to do with a woman. A Canaanite woman, at that. Already she has two huge strikes against her in society – she is a woman and she is a Canaanite – which was one of the most despised ethnic groups of that time. But the fact that she is a woman and a Canaanite doesn't bother the disciples or Jesus.

It is her yelling that annoys them. Her voice is loud and urgent and can't be missed in the crowd. She won't let up and keeps saying, "Have mercy on me...my daughter is tormented by demons!" Jesus hears her, but he doesn't respond. He just keeps walking, hearing her voice but doing nothing. And soon her voice becomes even louder and more urgent. "Have mercy on me! Heal my daughter!" And Jesus keeps walking.

And then the disciples can take it no longer. They have had enough of this woman. And so one of them tells Jesus to send her away because her shouting is so disruptive. Then Jesus walks over to her to remind her that she is out of the group that Jesus was sent to save. She is a Canaanite. She is despised. She is not among the chosen people, and either is her daughter.

And he tells her just that, but not in such kind terms. In fact, Jesus calls her a dog. Jesus and his disciples are certainly annoyed with that woman.

38 years ago, some people in our Lutheran church body were also annoyed, and it once again involved women. 38 years ago, in 1970, the first woman was ordained into the Lutheran ministry. Her name was Elizabeth Platz and that ordination didn't happen without a fight. Some left the church because of it.

And before that ordination, there had to be seminary, which was a fight in itself. I remember my seminary professor, Connie Kleingartner, telling us how difficult it was to be a woman in seminary in the 1970's. Many women could relate to the Canaanite woman who was called a dog. Because they were called that and much worse.

Connie told us one story where she was the only woman in one of her classes. The professor would always greet the class by saying, "Good morning, gentlemen." And then when Connie entered the class, he would still greet the class by saying, "Good morning, gentlemen." The professor refused to acknowledge that there was a woman in the class, and he refused to give Connie that greeting. So there were professors and students alike who were annoyed with women.

I invite you to think back to the Canaanite woman. She has probably been ridiculed most of her life. She then does something that surprises even Jesus.

She stands up to him. She retaliates and says, "Lord, even the dogs get the crumbs on the floor." She reminds him that she is still a person, that her daughter is in need of his healing touch.

I wonder what the disciples did when they heard her stand up to Jesus. Did they snicker amongst themselves, thinking that Jesus was really going to let her have it? Did they try and keep Jesus moving along the road, like some kind of secret service agency? Or were they just as surprised and moved as Jesus was?

And Connie did something that surprised her classmates and professor alike. One morning, when the professor greeted the class with, “good morning, gentlemen”, she raised her voice and said, “and woman.” And she continued to do that every day. The professor never acknowledged her, but she still did that every morning.

I wonder what her classmates did when they heard her stand up to that professor. Did they snicker among themselves, thinking that the professor was really going to let her have it? Did they ignore her and just start the class discussion? Or were they just as surprised as the professor was?

The Canaanite woman’s persistence paid off. She didn’t quiet down, and look what happened to her. Jesus listened. He changed his mind and agreed to heal the woman’s daughter. I’ll bet her shouts of desperation quickly turned into shouts of thankfulness and joy.

Pastors Elizabeth Platz and Connie Kleingartner’s persistence paid off, too. They didn’t quiet down, and look what happened to them. Pastor Elizabeth was the first woman ordained, and Connie is one of the most respected seminary professors I know. And they paved the way for so many pastors that followed them, both men and women alike, and showed us how to respect each other.

I wonder if anyone ever thanked the Canaanite woman for what she did. I wonder if she was a role model for anyone else in her town or who had a similar status as she did. I know that the Canaanite woman was a role model for Mary Hinkle Shore, a professor at Luther Seminary. She was so moved by the Canaanite woman that she decided to write her a letter. Here is some of what she wrote,

“Dear Canaanite Sister, You go girl! I’ve never seen anyone talk to Jesus like that. And this from someone who so clearly does not belong. I heard you first, before I saw you. You were screaming, crying, crying out. What were you doing there? What was Jesus doing there? You would tell him. “Have mercy on me, Son of David,” you said. “My daughter...my daughter is tormented by a demon.

The disciples wondered if the demon didn’t have hold of you, too. Did you teach the Teacher? Yes, I’m sure you did. Because of you and your fierce need, Jesus himself came to see his life’s work as bigger than before. He saw your tenacious conviction that he could help, and amazed, he did.

What else will you help us see? Will you help us see the work of God going on for us in places where we don’t belong? Will you help us see a stranger on the road, out of place himself? Will you help us see these things when we are terrified? You taught the Teacher.” –Mary

The Canaanite woman taught Jesus a thing or two about crossing boundaries and what it means to be the savior of the WHOLE world. God’s grace broke through to that woman and her daughter. Jesus crossed those cultural boundaries and reached his healing hand out to not a Canaanite...not a woman...but a hurting human being.

Jesus learned that God’s touch knows no bounds. God’s touch knows no border or gender or financial situation or status in society. God’s touch is for everyone, including you and me. And when we feel that we are not being heard, we can learn from that Canaanite woman and know that when we yell, God hears.

And we can learn from that Canaanite woman that sometimes it’s okay to be annoying. That sometimes the very thing that is needed is to raise a ruckus. When there are injustices. When discrimination and prejudice are still prevalent. When sexual harassment and bullying and child abuse still happen. When there are still people here in this very town who have nothing to eat today. It’s okay to be annoying. Because we know if we annoy the right people, change for the better can happen.

Pastors Connie and Elizabeth were annoying. They wreaked havoc in the Lutheran world 30 years ago. And I for one, am so glad that they annoyed people. So today, as you leave church, ask yourself, "How can I annoy people today?" Amen.