

**St. Bartholomew's Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ - Associate Rector

Scripture: Matthew 15: 21-28

***"It's What's Inside That Counts!"***

In today's Gospel, Matthew paints a picture of a Jesus that makes me somewhat uneasy, and uncomfortable. The Jesus I know is: The Good Shepherd; The loving teacher; The Healer who would reach into broken lives and make them whole; the Son of God who came to earth to die for our sins. Everything I've ever read about Him in the Gospels speaks of a tender and loving Savior who gave all He had for us. But in this Gospel reading we seem to be seeing an entirely different Jesus. On the outside He appears to be harsh, callous, uncaring. There is a grieving mother who comes to Him seeking help. And what does Jesus do?

- First, He ignores this woman.
- Then, Jesus tells His disciples that His ministry is only for the lost sheep of Israel.
- And then, Jesus calls her a dog!

This is a surprising reaction to a woman – a Gentile woman. At first, I want to tell you that this is not how I would expect my Lord and Savior to respond to a woman in crisis. Looking closer at this Gospel account, I realized several things:

- This was NOT the first time Jesus has been approached by Gentiles for help. In Luke 6:17 we see Jesus right after He chose His 12 disciples - "*a great multitude of people out of all Judea and Jerusalem, and from the sea coast of Tyre and Sidon, came to hear him, and to be healed of their diseases.*" Jesus healed people from Tyre and Sidon– just like this woman was - only a few months earlier.
- Matthew chapter 8, Jesus healed the servant of a Roman centurion. Romans were Gentiles just like this woman - they were hated by almost all of the Jews, and yet Jesus didn't object to healing THAT man's servant.

THIS is the ONLY TIME, we know of, that Jesus went into the land of Tyre and Sidon, and (as far as we can tell) SHE is the ONLY person that Jesus met while He was there.

I want to suggest to you that Jesus went to the land of Tyre and Sidon just for THIS specific meeting with THIS specific woman - a Canaanite, a pagan, who was probably a worshipper of idols. Jesus had made it very clear how He felt about pagan idol worshippers! He said: "*Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.*

*Nevertheless I say to you, it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the Day of Judgment, than for you.*" (Matthew 11:21-22) It was clear that Tyre and Sidon were the epitome of wickedness. They were the "sin-cities" of their day. You might say that had there been an advertising campaign back then there might have been a slogan that said: "**What happens in Tyre and Sidon - stays in Tyre and Sidon**" It was a land filled with immorality, corruption and self-indulgence.

As we know - Jews didn't have much to do with Gentiles. A Gentile was anyone who was not born of Jewish parents. If you were a Gentile - Jews would not talk to you; they would not eat with you; in fact, they would have hated the very idea of even doing business with you.

First century Jews had a special bath called a mikvah, which contained natural water – either ground water or rain water for ritual cleansing. One of the uses was to wash off the ceremonial filthiness of items purchased from Gentiles. The general attitude towards these non-Jews was that they were to be tolerated, and possibly even hated. The people even had a term to describe their feelings about the Gentiles- which translated in Greek - κύων (koo'-ohn) means "a dog."

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This is not the kind of dog like Rover, or Buddy, or even Lassie. Jews didn't give these sorts of dog's names, for they were wild, mongrels, scavengers that lived off garbage dragging it through the streets. In short, they were filthy, unclean animals. The disciples saw in this woman - "*a dog*," and viewed her as a worthless excuse for a human being. Even worse: she was from the land of Tyre and Sidon; she was one of the worst of all Gentiles.

So, when she comes to the house where Jesus is staying and then starts crying out for help, the disciples just want to get rid of her and they say: "*Send her away, for she is shouting out after us.*" (Matthew 15:23) They simply don't want her around. In their estimation - she is not worthy of Jesus' attention.

Now remember, these are the Disciples of Jesus Christ. Jesus had chosen them; He selected them to be the future leaders in the church that He had come to establish. These men were going to set the pattern for what the church would be like. They would establish the mindset for generations of believers to come; and apparently, deep within their hearts was this bigotry and hatred of people like this woman.

**On the outside**, these men look like they might be ready for the job of leadership. After all, they've been with Jesus for several years now; they have preached to crowds, they have healed the sick, they have cast out demons. They look like their ready - but they're not ready! **It's what's inside that counts!**

**They look good on the outside.** But on the inside, they're a little like an old building that's falling apart. **There's something ugly and dangerous on the inside** that makes them structurally unsound. They are in serious need of drastic renovation- **an extreme makeover** - to make them useful to God. Jesus knows exactly what is going through His disciples' minds; Jesus knows how they view this Canaanite woman; and that is precisely why they came to the land of Tyre and Sidon.

- That is why Jesus lets this little "drama" play out as it does.
- Jesus knows *all about* this woman.
- Jesus knows of her sorrow and her pain and her need.
- Jesus knows that she is the very kind of person that He came to earth to help.
- **Jesus loves this woman - but His disciples don't!**

Jesus said that He had come "*to seek and to save that which was lost.*" (Luke 19:10)

We know that Jesus spent time with people who no one else wanted to have around: tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners. Romans 5:8 pretty well sums up why Jesus became man: "*God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*" The human heart can be filled with the poisons of this world and the Apostle Paul reveals to us the nature of Jesus toward that poisoned heart. Listen to his words from his letter to Titus: "*For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that being justified by His grace we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*" (Titus 3:3-7) Boy - **doesn't that hit home!** Before Jesus came into our lives that is how we lived our lives - and **Jesus could have left us that way**; He could have totally ignored us; He could have simply let us go our merry way - straight to hell; **BUT Jesus did not.**

This woman stood outside that house crying out, "*Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.*" (Matthew 15:22) And you know what? Jesus treated her just the way His disciples would expect a good Jewish rabbi, of that day, to; **He ignored her!** This is a desperate woman – a mother - pleading for her daughter and she will not be ignored! She "*bowed down before Jesus*" and kept crying out "*Lord, help me!*" (Matthew 15:25) This lady would just not give up – and her persistence was making the Disciples uncomfortable, to say the least. Oh, they had seen mothers like that in their own villages and towns; women who loved their sons and their daughters so deeply that they would be willing to do anything to protect them. They had seen pain like this before; they had seen sorrow that could not be healed, and **they just wanted it to go away.** It was really getting to them and they said to Jesus: "*Send her away, for she is shouting out after us.*" (Matthew 15:23) But Jesus' answer was, "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" (Matthew 15:24) Jesus, despite the pleas holds back. There is something that Jesus wants His disciples, and us, to learn from this. Jesus' response is an echo of the Disciple's inner feelings – He says: "*It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to **the dogs.***" (Matthew 15:26) But Jesus does not say this to her as an insult; in fact, He did not even use the same kind of word that most Jews would have thrown at her- remember I just spoke about the Greek word κύνων (koo-ohn), but instead, **Jesus used a slightly different word which when translated in Greek: κυνάριον (kunarion) - means a little dog, or a puppy.** Jesus did not say mongrel, but instead a puppy - a pet! Do you see the marvelous difference? This word is used throughout their exchange!

In first century Israel, people of means would keep little dogs as pets just like we do. If you love pets you know that you feed them, shelter them, and care for them. They become a part of the family! I can just imagine the smile on this woman's face – because Jesus told her in a very simple way that she was loved by God. She gratefully says to Jesus: "*Yes, Lord; but **even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.***" (Matthew 15:27) This is just what Jesus' disciples needed to hear. They needed know that God loved even this Canaanite woman, they had despised. They needed to know that God's love reaches far beyond the Jews! And they needed to hear the faith of this Gentile woman acknowledged by Jesus. **It's what's inside that counts!**

A few years ago on ABC's 20/20 they had a segment on the marketing of cute little baby chicks. They filmed the process of the packaging department as these cute little tiny chicks traveled on conveyer belts past workers. As they moved along the belt - the workers would select them to fit into boxes to be shipped out and to be sold. These chicks were chosen by sex, size, and overall general appearance. But some were not chosen. The cameras followed these un-chosen baby chicks as they slipped by the workers and fell off the end of the conveyer belt - to die! You know, there are people in this world that don't fit into the box. They go through life, never getting picked, or never chosen – laden with guilt, shame, and sins. That's just the way it is; if you don't fit into the box, you're rejected and left to die. But our Lord, Jesus Christ went to the cross to tell us that this is not the way God deals with us. God does not choose us because we fit into a particular box. He chooses us because He created us and He loves us. God loves the sinner – but hates the sin! God LOVES the SINNER! All heaven rejoices when a sinner repents!

This Canaanite woman accepted Jesus for who He is - He is the Lord; He is the Son of David; He is the prophesied Son of God who had come; the Messiah. She acknowledged that in Him.

Secondly, **she came seeking mercy.** She came to Jesus asking for His mercy because she

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knew she didn't deserve it and she came to Jesus on His terms. And that is what is expected of us today as well. We believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God! We acknowledge that we are sinners and that only the blood of Jesus can cover our sins! If you accept Him as your Lord and Master, then you are willing to allow Him to lead you for the rest of your life. That faith in Jesus Christ is what makes you a **believer** – and that faith is what is deep inside you! **It's what's inside that counts!**

I would like to share with you the story of a family – who lived in a beautiful house. They were a very close and tight knit family – who loved to share everything: they got together weekly, and enjoyed all of the holidays together. They would spend Christmas, and Easter, Thanksgiving and more; celebrating their unity as a family in this wonderful house. What great memories were made there!

Over the years something began to happen that affected the house and everyone in it. Slowly – the foundation of this house began to be permeated by **poisons from outside** – that were creeping in – and **making the house virtually unsafe**. There was radon, asbestos, lead, hazardous waste, ground water contamination, formaldehyde, - you name it - that although were unseen – were threatening the lives of anyone in the house – even those just visiting!

Several members of this family started to notice symptoms of illness, symptoms of being poisoned – that would seem to lessen shortly after being away from this beloved house. They alerted the others – but there were **some who paid absolutely no attention to the warnings**. Most of the family decided that they would meet at another house for a while. Before long, only one member of the family insisted on staying put; **refusing to believe that there was any problem at all**. They just wouldn't leave that building! **All that was left for that person were the memories – and the poison! It's what's inside that counts!**

Soon all of the family's celebrations were held in another house – and that family would happily recall all of the great times in the old house – busy making new memories and seeing the family grow in number, in love, and in health. They continued to invite their beloved family member who remained back at the old homestead, lovingly reminding that they wanted the whole family to feel welcome to come and join them – but **the old house was just too important to that person who could not let go** – even to the point of severe illness and death.

Here is a family that was torn apart because of the horrible poison from outside that crept into the very foundation of this house – and before they knew it - it was too late – it had taken what they loved and made it deadly. The house still looked great on the outside; for appearances sake it was wonderful – **but what was inside that foundation was deadly** – it held no promise at all, no future. Inside that foundation - all of the good that had been there had been eaten away – and **replaced by poison and death**. There was nothing left there for them on the inside. They found that the memories were portable – the memories were deep within them, they went with them wherever they went – and thank God, they left the poison behind.

**This story may strike a familiar chord with you;** and I think it is very much like the old story of the frog and the pot of water. If you put a frog in a pot of boiling water – it will jump out every time. You can't fool that old frog! However, if you put a frog in a pot of cold water – and then turn the heat on very low – the temperature will slowly rise, and slowly boil that old frog – and he won't even realize what happened. You see – **it's what's inside that counts!**