



THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Light of the Valley Lutheran Church

Picked Last

Matthew 15:21-28 (NIV84)

²¹ Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession." ²³ Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." ²⁵ The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. ²⁶ He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." ²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

You all have to know right off the bat that I had a hard time wrapping my head around our Gospel reading. There is the truth here that Jesus is for all people, but at the same time Jesus does and says things that seem so contrary to that idea.

Dive back into the story with me. Jesus is walking along with his disciples. He's not in Jewish territory, but rather up north on the west coast of the Middle East by the Mediterranean Sea. A Canaanite woman, a local resident, not a Jew, comes out to him crying, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession." (verse 22)

How does Jesus respond? He says nothing. No acknowledgement. No excuses. No rationale. We are just told, "Jesus did not answer a word." (verse 23) What's going on here? Why would the Savior of the world ignore a request for help?

The woman's pleas for help went on for so long that "his disciples came to [Jesus] and urged him, 'Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.'" (verse 23) Jesus answers his disciples, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." (verse 24) Wait a minute. You really are ignoring this woman? I thought you were the Savior of the world!

The woman, instead of turning away, gets more aggressive. She comes before Jesus and keels down, pleading, "Lord, help me!" (verse 25) His answer: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." (verse 26) Why will Jesus not help her already? Is she really so insignificant, so low, that he viewed her as nothing more than a dog?

Surprisingly, the woman agrees with Jesus, "Yes, Lord." Then she persists, "But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." (verse 27) Why will she accept this lowly position? Why is she okay being an afterthought to Jesus?

All of the sudden, it's like this veil is lifted. Jesus answers her, "'Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.' And her daughter was healed from that very hour." (verse 28) That's the mind-blowing part. It seems like Jesus gave all of the signs that he had absolutely no interest in dealing with this woman, wasn't going to serve her because his ministry was to the Israelites, then he praises her faith and grants her request.

Does God play favorites? Does he love or value someone more than another? Because that kind of seems like what God is doing here to this Canaanite woman. He was ready not to serve her because he was there for the Israelites, the Jews.

That whole idea of God playing favorites rebels against what we know of God. There is even a passage from the book of Romans that says "God does not show favoritism." (Romans 2:11) So, what is up with how Jesus treats this Canaanite woman?

God's plan all along was to come first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles. This is the promise he made so long ago to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and further revealed and reinforced it with the prophets. He would preach first to them, and then his message would be carried to the Gentiles, specifically through apostles like Peter and Paul.

Maybe this is why Jesus was not answering the Canaanite woman so as to make clear his mission. We probably don't think about this a whole lot, but Jesus spent the vast majority of his ministry among the Jews. It would be after his resurrection that he would commission his apostles to go and make disciples of all nations, and give direct, pointed instructions to reach out and minister to the Gentiles, the non-Jews.

Jesus, Peter, Paul – all of them record for us in Scripture that Jesus came first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles. Like we talked about last week, out of all the nations in the world, out of all the people, God chose the Israelites to be the bearers of his name, the

bearers of his promises, and to be the bearer of the Messiah. They were not chosen because they were favored by God but because God chose them out of love.

This goes against our whole idea of picking teams. When you make your draft choices for your fantasy football team, you make calculated picks on the best value for the best player. You are playing to win. You want the best of what you can afford, the best of the best if you can have it. This is even how we picked teams at recess in elementary school. Captains picked first either the top athletes or their best friends. They were the people who were most valuable to them. And if you were like me, you were sitting there hoping you didn't get picked last because you knew that if you were picked last that you had little or no value to the people you would be playing for. You were picked last because they didn't really want you.

That's how we pick teams. So, it only makes sense that we would project our way of picking teams to God. When we heard Jesus words to the Canaanite woman, it seems like he was saying that she was not on his team, and he wasn't going to give up his first round draft picks of the Israelites for this outsider, this dog.

Although we pick based on value, God picks differently. God picks people in a way that stays true to his Word, and he picks based on the fact that he has already won. He doesn't pick people because he needs them or because they are valuable assets to him or because he wants friends. He picks us simply because he wants us on his team. He picks us because he wants us to share in his hard fought victory.

This means that no matter what order God picks you, whether you are a first round draft pick or last on the last round, you are a part of his team. This is what Jesus was saying to the woman, and she understood it. This was the whole, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." (verse 26) Jesus was not insulting the woman or devaluing her. No, what he was saying was that it is not right for me not to keep my promise, for me to abandon my ministry to the Jews and only pick you. Jesus is reiterating that promise that as the Son of David, as was promised long ago, he come first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles. He can't take the meal that he prepared for the children and feed it to the household dogs, letting the kids go hungry.

The woman understood. She got it that it would not be right to ask Jesus to minister to her instead of ministering to the Jews. She knew that Jesus was going to be a blessing both for the Jews and for the Gentiles, that Jesus had indeed come for the whole world. "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." (verse 27) She agrees with Jesus statement, accepts her placement, and asks for the blessing he had intended for her. Give me the scraps. They are enough. All I need is that little bit to know that my daughter who is suffering terribly from demon-possession will be cured. The scraps from your table are that good. It doesn't matter if I'm not the first one you were sent to because you were sent to me. You still give me the scraps. Even if I am picked last, if I am waiting for the leftovers, you have picked me to be a part of your victory over the devil.

This is why Jesus praises her faith. She does not recoil from Jesus thinking that she should be first in line, but understands that Jesus came first for the Jews, and then for the Gentiles, but all people are cared for and saved by Jesus – whether they are first portions or the crumbs that fall to the floor. She gets it that anyone who is a part of Jesus' team, Jesus' household, would be taken care of and have all that they need including the final victory over all evil.

The faith of the Canaanite woman, a faith which had total confidence in Jesus to be a blessing to all people, no matter the order in which you or I were chosen, that is a faith worth emulating. Christ indeed came first for the Jew, and then for the Gentile, but he came as a blessing to all.

So, you and I, we may not be the star athletes, the best of what Christianity has to offer. We may not be the first round draft choices, humanly speaking, and that can hurt our pride, but God has chosen us. We cannot base our pride on the order that we are picked, but instead we put our pride in the one who picked us. We are a part of his team, and we share in his victory, just like the Canaanite woman. Amen.

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