

## “Unexpected Faith”

Matthew 15:21-28

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If you go to the new wing of the Cleveland Art Museum, you can see three paintings by artist Vincent Van Gogh that are by themselves worth the price of admission. (Just kidding—the museum is always free!) For a long time, critics thought that Van Gogh became a great painter when he gave up his Christian faith. But Kathleen Erickson writes in her book on Van Gogh that he held onto authentic faith, but an unconventional one.<sup>1</sup> We understand that from 750 letters he wrote to his brother Theo that serve as his autobiography. Van Gogh did leave the church because of what he saw as the hypocrisy of his father and uncle, who were both Dutch Reformed pastors. But Erickson argues that he never abandoned the Christian faith. His letters were full of references to the Bible. His great sense of calling was to express that faith in a new visual language for the modern world.

At first, Van Gogh wanted to be a missionary. He went as a humble preacher to the poor mining country in northern Belgium, shared the Gospel, lived in poverty among the miners, and gave away everything he had. Van Gogh had faith, but was unexpected faith, humble faith, trying to bring the healing of Jesus to the poor.

In our story from the Bible this morning, there’s another healing. But the focus isn’t on the actual healing, but on the person asking for healing for someone else, her daughter. The story’s different from most healings in the Gospel, because it concerns a foreigner, an outsider.

It makes us think about the focus of Jesus’ ministry. He had a strategy. So, when Jesus sent out the twelve apostles on their first preaching mission, he instructed them,

“Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.” (Matthew 10:5-6)

But the good news about Jesus wasn’t just for Israel—it was for the whole world. Jesus ministry started with Israel, but that was to lay the foundations for a ministry that wouldn’t only reach Israel, but would reach the world. So in the end, Jesus tells his disciples they are going to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Some people think this passage is about Jesus himself *learning*—as if he started out thinking God’s mission was only for Jews, and ends up thinking it’s also for Gentiles. They think Jesus was reluctant to help, but that an insistent woman wins him over. But I don’t think that’s it at all. Jesus has a very specific plan for breaking out beyond the boundaries of nationalism, and this story illustrates how he begins to do that. It’s not like he had no compassion for the woman whose daughter was suffering. It’s the opposite of that. He was specifically helping her move to real, explicit, mature faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Erickson, *At Eternity’s Gate: The Spiritual Vision of Vincent Van Gogh*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998.

The Canaanite woman starts with generic faith.

The passage tells us Jesus went into the territory of Tyre and Sidon. Those were two coastal cities in Syria, in present-day Lebanon. Now, in Mark's Gospel, it says the "the woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia" (Mark 7:26). When Matthew calls her "a Canaanite woman," that would call a particular image to mind for Jews. They would have thought of Old Testament times, when the Canaanites were enemies and a threat to Israel's faith, like Jews and Arabs today. Those people were considered dogs to Jews, not as in "Man's Best Friend," but as in scavenging pack animals that ate unclean things. Canaanites were the enemy, idolaters who worshiped false gods, and they were unclean.

Matthew seems surprised at the audacity of the woman, because he introduces the story with the words, "And look! A Canaanite woman from that area came to him." She's certainly bold. She comes and starts shouting "Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David" (v. 22)

That title comes from Jesus history. David was the greatest king in Jewish history, and he became a kind of picture of the perfect king and Messiah that God would send one day. The term "Son of David" meant the Messiah, the one Israel looked forward to that would save them one day from all their enemies. When the outsider, the non-Jew, the enemy cried out "Son of David," it was like she was saying, "Have mercy, and count me as one of your people even though I'm not."

The woman is definitely going to the right place for help, but it's not exactly an Apostles' Creed kind of faith, not at first. She doesn't affirm Jesus as the Son of God in the flesh, the Second Person of the Trinity. She doesn't ask forgiveness for her sins or promise to follow him. She just sees him as the hope of Israel, and cries out for help.

But if she wasn't a Jew, why did she want a Jewish Savior? Let me make four observations from the text.

First, until now God's plan for the world was through Israel.

God called Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and promised to make them a great nation, with descendents like the stars of the sky, and to bless all the nations of the world through them.

God gave the Jewish people his Law. Into a chaotic world God spoke order and truth, and he gave the Law to one people alone, so they would be chosen and holy and set apart from the world.

God performed great signs and wonders through Moses, when he confronted Pharaoh and brought his people out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land to worship and serve him.

God spoke his word through the prophets of Israel to call his people back, to be faithful to God when they had forgotten him and run after false gods. The Canaanite woman had heard of the God of Israel, and in the face of all the false gods of all the nations, he looked pretty good.

Second, Israel was proud of being God's special people.

When the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth a few years after this story took place, he's irritated with the people's attitude. His answer gives a good sense of how much the people of Israel took pride in being chosen by God. Paul writes,

"What anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I." (2 Corinthians 10:21b-22)

Sometime after that, he confronts the same pride in another church in Philippi:

"If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless." (Philippians 3:4b-6)

That's the kind of pride that made many Jews oppose Jesus:

They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone." (John 8:33)

"We are not illegitimate children," they protested. "The only Father we have is God himself." (John 8:41)

But that kind of pride keeps us from God. James wrote,

"God opposes the proud  
but gives grace to the humble." (James 4:6)

Third, pride keeps you from God, but humility opens the way.

When you're proud, you can't admit you need help. People's pride keeps them from Jesus. The Apostle Paul used the picture of an olive tree; he said the tree was the tradition of Abraham; proud people who think they don't need God's help are broken off the trunk. But humble people who simply trust God are grafted into it.

It's kind of like learning a language. You have to put pride behind you, because if you have to look cool and know what you're doing, you can never learn. You have to be willing to look like a fool—to go up to an ice cream stand in Tuscany and say "Vorei una gelato, per favori," and your accent is so bad little kids laugh at you, or try to ask for your bill in a German gasthaus, and the waiter says "Ah!" and runs to get you a piece of toast. The only way to learn is to put aside your pride, and to humble yourself.

That's the kind of humble spirit of a Roman officer who went to Jesus for help. Jesus said he would come and heal the officer's servant, and he responded:

"Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. (Matthew 8:8)

The Roman didn't welcome Jesus into his house that day; he welcomed him into his heart. Jesus was impressed by that kind of humility. He answered,

"I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 8:10-11)

That's the kind of humble spirit the Canaanite woman had: "Yes, Lord—I'm just a dog. I just want crumbs."

Look how much Jesus honored her. He didn't just say, "Your daughter is healed." He said, ""Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." (Matthew 15:28)

Fourth, the woman is a picture of God's worldwide mission to build the body of Christ.

The story seems a little rough. Does Jesus almost seem hard-hearted here? Why would he have to be coerced into showing mercy for a poor, tormented little girl? Why would he make a woman beg for help? I've heard one scholar suggest Jesus was being abusive here. Was he?

I think something else entirely was going on here. I think Jesus was giving the woman a great gift, by helping her see what she really believed, by helping her claim her faith.

If what she had at the beginning was generic faith, then what she had at the end was deeply personal. By him leading her to confess what she held most true, she understood her faith and Jesus' mercy in a whole new way. Look again at the conversation.

1. The woman came to Jesus and cried out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy."
2. Jesus ignored her.
3. His disciples pressed him, so he said, "I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."
4. She fell at his feet and worshiped him, and said, "Lord, help me!"
5. Jesus said, "It isn't fair to take the children's food and toss it to the dogs!"

Wow! That sounds harsh! Jesus is suggesting the Jews are God's children and the Gentiles are dogs. The word Jesus uses is a little softer than it sounds: it is the word for little dogs, or house dogs. Anyway, the woman agreed. She said,

6. "Yes, Lord, but even the little dogs get the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

She's saying, you came to your people, but they didn't want what you offered. What they're throwing away, give to us that want it. And Jesus responded,

7. "Woman, your faith is great. Your request is granted." It will be done as she wanted.

So the woman started out with so little, and now it seems like she has everything. First Jesus ignored her, then he had hard words for her, and then he affirms her wonderfully, personally, powerfully. She's a good model for faith.

Faith is humble. It comes to Jesus like a beggar in need. It hangs in there. It believes Jesus will deliver. And it overcomes discouragement, even when Jesus seems to be against you. But he's not, and faith believes he's for you.

Faith is overcoming followers of Jesus who get in the way, too. If you look to other people as your inspiration, they're going to disappoint you sooner or later. And you'll disappoint others, yourself. But faith that is crushed by bad behavior in God's people is weak faith. We believe in the "communion of the saints," not the perfection of the saints. The only way to not be dragged down by God's people who act in un-Christian and unconverted ways is to keep your eyes on Jesus, because he always comes through.

The woman was a Canaanite, and represented the Gentiles who would come to Jesus. He's for the whole world. Like the Prophet Hosea said,

In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.' (Hosea 1:10)

Jesus had a strategy. The good news started with Israel, but it wasn't just for Israel. He's going to tell his disciples in chapter 24,

And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (Matthew 24:14)

God was faithful to his own people, but he doesn't just leave them to look inward. He's reaching out through them, and now through us, to bring the good news about Jesus to the whole world. You don't get the power and goodness and healing of God just by being a member of Israel or a member of Christ Presbyterian Church. You get it by trusting in Jesus, and by hanging in there with your faith.