

"JESUS AND THE CANAANITE WOMAN"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
September 26, 1993

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INTRODUCTION

To me, one of the most appealing characteristics of the historical Jesus is how open He was to people. Will Rogers once said that he never met a man he didn't like. Jesus never met a person He didn't love. People from all backgrounds and all walks of life found themselves at ease in His presence. He never came across as stuffy or pretentious, arrogant or abrasive. He was open to people...and we admire that quality when...

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"Is it my collar you're staring at" he asked...taking it off and holding it up. As he took it off he happened to notice the cleaning instructions on the inside of the collar and to make conversation, he asked, "Do you know what it says here?" "Yes" replied the seven year old. It says, "Kills fleas for six months".

DEVELOPMENT

Now I can hear Jesus telling a joke on Himself. I think that people who are secure in themselves don't have to "put on airs". They can poke a bit of fun at themselves. Jesus was open and caring and people of all sorts were drawn to Him. His sense of humor helped people around a corner of life

CANAANITE Our scripture story for today is taken from the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew and it's about a woman who was drawn to Him. She came to Him for help, help not for herself but for her daughter. And the truth of the matter is as you read between the lines...she made a bit of a nuisance of herself. She cried out to Him,

"Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David. My daughter is severely possessed by a demon". (Matthew 15: 22)

Her rather intemperate tone probably made the disciples uncomfortable. "Send her away" they said to Jesus, "For she is crying after us".

We've all seen pictures of women in Bosnia crying for their dead and their wounded. My guess is that this woman was crying with somewhat of that same sort of abandon and the disciples were embarrassed and uncertain how to deal with her.

And Jesus Himself was put in an uncomfortable position. We read "But He did not answer her a word". The mission of Jesus was to the Jews. He does go on to answer her saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel". And if He thought that this reply would discourage her, He was wrong. She proceeded to kneel at His feet and say, "Lord, help me". Jesus gave her a rather hard and stern answer, saying, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (Matthew 15: 26).

Really, it's hard for us to imagine that such an unkind word came from His lips. We do know it did not come from His heart; perhaps He was testing her. And if it was a test, she passed it with flying colors for she said, "Yes, Lord....yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

Jesus was in a bind no longer. He sensed...He knew that her heart was genuine and with this He exclaimed,

"Oh, woman! Great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire it." And her daughter was healed....instantly!

PEOPLE ARE PEOPLE REGARDLESS OF THEIR LABEL

Now there are three easy lessons for us to take away from this

little story in Matthew's Gospel. All are important for us to remember. The first is that people are people regardless of the label they may wear. Let me repeat that: people are people regardless of the label they may wear and we're so quick to put labels on people and make our little judgements, aren't we?

Let me share a story with you that caught my attention in a recent Upper Room publication. It seems that a Martha Johnson and her friend, Linda, were driving to a lake upstate in the Adirondacks in July. It was a hot afternoon and suddenly about eight or ten leather-jacketed and helmeted motor-cyclists roared past them. Martha and Linda grimaced. Those anonymous figures on their noisy machines made them a bit uncomfortable.

Lake George was quite crowded that afternoon. As Linda was wading waist deep in the water, she suddenly disappeared. Before the lifeguard could reach her a nearby swimmer dove to the rescue and surfaced with Linda in a matter of seconds...with Linda safe in his arms. He carried her to the beach, telling her that everything was going to be all right. He stayed with her until he was sure she was fine. The woman thanked the man for this heroic gesture, but it really was no big deal for him. This stranger returned and rejoined his friends.

Later that day as the two women were getting ready to leave they noticed one of the leather-clad motor cyclists walking ahead of them. Martha thought to herself, "Oh, no". But in an instant, however, whatever negative thoughts she was entertaining about motor cyclists turned around for she saw it was the young man who had earlier pulled Linda from the water. She was relieved that he did not know what she was thinking in that moment. The two women thanked the man again as he climbed on his motorcycle and roared away. Martha thought to herself,

"How quick I had been to judge....categorizing him on the basis of how he looked...."

We all have a tendency to do that type of thing. It's so easy to put people into our little categories of "desirable" or "undesirable" on the basis of dress or length of hair or color of skin or accent or family background. We all do it!

Two little neighborhood girls about the same age - one Christian and the other Jewish - were constant companions. After one Easter holiday, the grandfather of the Christian girl asked her what her friend had received for Easter. The girl looked at her grandfather in surprise and said,

"But grandpa, you should know that Becky is Jewish and she wouldn't get anything for Easter....."

Then she went on to explain patiently to her grandfather, "You see, I'm Easter and she's Passover. I'm Christmas and she Hanukkah". And with a big smile she added,

"But grandpa...I'm really glad that both of us are Halloween".

This encounter that Jesus had that day with the Canaanite woman reveals to us the divisions among peoples that are still tearing our world apart even today. However, when we take the trouble to get to know each other as Jesus got to know this woman in this brief encounter, we so often discover that people are people whatever labels they may wear.

AND FAITH IS FAITH WHEREVER WE MAY ENCOUNTER IT, TOO

But there's a second thing we need to see and that is that faith is faith wherever we may encounter it. This story gives support to a belief I have long held that the faith many of us have is far more than mere subscription to a certain set of inherited doctrines. Faith is a condition of the heart otherwise Jesus would not have declared this woman to be a person of great faith. I'm reminded of those words of the late Dean Pike who put it this way that "what we need is more belief and fewer beliefs".

I was reading somewhere that the FBI trains its agents very carefully to spot counterfeit bills and they do this not with counterfeit bills but with real money. They're trained to see all of the characteristics of bona-fide bills. They deal with the genuine article, with the real thing. An FBI agent learns to recognize authentic \$1, \$5, \$10, \$20, \$50 and \$100 bills until his or her appraisal of them becomes something so automatic, so virtually instinctive and of a second nature....they know the real thing. Their minds aren't cluttered with what "might be wrong", or "what is usually left off" or "mistakes commonly made". They're specialists in the real thing for they know what they're looking for. False bills are quite obvious to them.

Last Spring we witnessed a terrible tragedy just outside of Waco, Texas as a religious fanatic by the name of Koresh led his followers to a horrifying death. Across the years of my ministry, I've watched (as you may have) other charismatic figures come and go, usually with less destructive but still disheartening results. How do we protect people, particularly young people and children, from falling prey to such leaders? One way is to show them the real thing. Parents who profess one set of values and then live another are setting themselves up for rebellion on the part of their young. That rebellion may take different forms. It may be against their Christian faith or it may take the guise of a fanatical obsession that rejects their parents' hypocrisy.

I do not hesitate to say that if you and I live the life of faith and of love and of hope that Jesus exemplified, we will protect our young from the religious phonies and dangerous fanatics that are "out there". And we will protect our society. I believe that an authentic witness of Christian faith and love will find a ready audience in today's world. As someone has wisely noted, "The Christian faith has not been tried and found wanting. It still remains to be tried".

People are people whatever label they may wear. And faith is faith wherever we may encounter it. And one final thing to lift up from this encounter that Jesus had with the Canaanite woman.

LOVE WILL FIND A WAY

And that is that love will always find a way. This woman was determined to find help for her daughter. The mission of Jesus was to the "lost sheep" of the House of Israel. This woman badgered Jesus and the disciples until her request was finally fulfilled. Jesus, in turn, cut across the deep divisions of His time in order to help someone in distress. The moral of both responses is that love will find a way!

And that is after all the story of the cross. It's the story of humanity "cut off" from its Creator. A chasm which no man or woman could cross until God set down a piece of wood in the shape of a cross. And that cross, dear friend, became a bridge - a bridge across which the love of God can travel and bring humanity back to its senses, back to home. It happened long ago at a busy cross roads of a world . It happened then and it still happens today as bridges are built between peoples and nations. We've seen it happen in recent....
handshake.

It's the sort of thing for which we remember Catherine Lowe...a young wife and mother and whose husband was the warden up here at Sing Sing prison some eighty years ago. Back then, at the beginning of this century, women were not allowed inside the prison, not even the wife of the warden. However, Catherine Lowe was filled with love and wanted to share her gift of love and of concern with others. She was told that she absolutely could not enter the prison but she was a strong willed woman. There was the time when she risked harsh disciplinary treatment by sitting in the bleachers with her two daughters to watch the first inmate basketball game. Much to her amazement she was not chastised for her action. That one tiny step led to bolder steps. She wanted to help the prisoners. She believes that love could make a difference in the life of anyone.

They tell about the time that she met a man by the name of Jack - in prison for having committed murder...a big, powerful man....blind and a victim of harsh and cruel racial injustice. She felt drawn to this hardened criminal and wanted to help him. One day she introduced herself to him with the simple words, "Hi...Jack". There was no response. The scarred and battered face stared back with icy, unseeing eyes. "What books do you read" she asked him. The ice was broken as he spit out the words, "Lady...I'm blind and I can't read!" This was her opportunity and she said, "Oh...what about Braille?" No one had ever told Jack about Braille, let alone taken the time to teach him.

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CLOSING A blind man learned to read. A deaf man learned to communicate. Long ago a Canaanite woman received healing for her daughter. People are people whatever label they may wear. And faith is faith wherever we may encounter it and it's capable of changing a life, even a world. And finally, always remember that love can and will find a way, if we give it a chance. That's the take home message for today. Go in peace.

PRAYER

Wrestle with us, O God, in the corners of our hearts where shadows of doubt and uncertainty, despair and unhappiness may be lurking. Bring us out of the shadows into the light and peace of Your presence. Make us sensitive to Your nearness and Your presence in these warm moments together. And send us out of here with a song in our hearts. In the spirit of Christ, the life-bringer, we now pray. Amen.

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