

"WHEN RULES GET IN THE WAY"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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INTRODUCTION

The story of the Canaanite woman whose daughter Jesus healed is so often interpreted as just that - another healing story - and evidence of the miraculous power of healing that Jesus had. Now in this case, someone was healed because of another's faith. A daughter was healed because of her mother's faith. It's amazing. And I think this would be great encouragement, especially to parents who worry about children who are sick or in any way afflicted, that your faith can heal them. Jesus says to the Canaanite woman, "Woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire."

DEVELOPMENT

Wouldn't that be a miracle? That my faith would have a salutary effect on the life of another? That's the way this text is so often preached. To get that message you identify with the Canaanite woman in the story. You assume that she is the chief character in the narrative. And if you do that then the message is: your faith can make a difference in the lives of other people. The text can be preached that way and it has been.

But I wonder if that is what Matthew really had in mind when he recorded this incident. I think not. You see Matthew, more than all the other Gospel writers, wrote his Gospel for the Church. It's called "The Ecclesiastical Gospel". By the time the Gospel is written the Church is established in the world - less a movement and more an institution. Matthew is telling the story of Jesus with the Church in mind. He makes the disciples represent the Church. He wants the Church to see themselves in the story, to identify with the Disciples. The questions of the Disciples are the questions of the Church, and the Disciples' behavior is the Church's behavior. In this passage Matthew was giving a message to the Church in its infancy. Matthew 15: 21 - 31. Page 849.

LOOK AT THE SCENE THIS WAY

Let's look at the scene this way. Jesus had been keeping a pretty heavy schedule. Everywhere He goes He does battle with the Pharisees. Once again, they're hounding Him. They show up everywhere and they heckle Him as He preaches. They throw loaded questions at Him. It's getting to Jesus now. It's getting to the Disciples, too. And so they decide to get away from the crowds, to get some rest and recuperation, to get away from the stress for a few days. And so they go outside of the country, certain that they will not be disturbed. They go to Tyre and Sidon. There they won't be recognized...there they can get some peace and quiet.

But no sooner do they cross the border than a woman, a non-Jew...a Canaanite, Matthew says she was...recognizes Jesus and makes her appeal, her pitch to Him.

Her daughter is sick. Will Jesus heal her? The Disciples say, "Send her away, for she is crying after us." She persists. And then Jesus speaks to her in a word that is difficult for us to imagine Him speaking, but this is a reconstructed event not a verbatim record. What Matthew is doing here is having Jesus iterate the belief of the Jews and some of the Church later, that the Messiah came only for the Jews. We already know that Jesus doesn't believe that. But He's setting us up for the punch line. This scene is addressed to the Church, and the first dispute in the Church was, "Did Jesus come only for the Jews?" And so He sets us up with these words, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel". She persists and He says, "Great is your faith. Be it done for you as you desire."

Now, is that a healing story? Or is it something more? Is it a Church story? If it's a Church story then I think it says a number of things to us.

INVOLVED IN THE WORLD'S SUFFERING

First, it says, if the Church follows Jesus it will have to get involved in the suffering of this world, even of those who are outside of the Church. It will have to respond to the cries of those in need no matter who they are, no matter where they are. That's what it means to be the Church.

Over the years I've had people ask me why I don't wear the uniform of a priest when I go outside the walls of the Church...why I don't wear something like a clerical collar. On occasion I've done that, but it's not the custom of most Methodist clergy to wear it. Who knows...maybe we tend to be more casual than our Lutheran or Anglican or Catholic counterparts. I'm reminded of an old story about Bishop Kennedy, when he was the Bishop of the California Conference of the Methodist Church. He was confronted once by Bishop Corson, the Methodist Bishop of Philadelphia, who was famous for getting his ministers to wear more priestly garb. Bishop Corson asked Bishop Kennedy, "Why don't you get your preachers out here to wear clerical collars?" And Bishop Kennedy replied, "Why I have a hard enough time trying to get them even to wear shoes."

It's never been a part of the style of the clergy of this New York Conference to wear clerical garb, not until recently, anyway. One sees more and more of our clergy now doing it, but I don't. I can't say I don't do it because I'm a Californian. I'm not into sandals and I'm not what you might call a "laid-back" preacher. You may have noticed that about me; I wish at times I could be more "laid-back", more casual. Maybe there's another reason at work in my subconscious as to why I'm not given to wearing a clerical collar.

Perhaps this is part of the reason. I want to go into the world the way the Disciples went into Tyre and Sidon - incognito. I know if I put on a collar and dress like a priest, someone is going to come up to me the moment I step out onto 86th Street and tell me their problems, want me to help them, give them some money. I know that to wear the uniform makes you vulnerable to Canaanite women and others, and all of those desperate people who need you and who ask for your help. I'd rather give at the office. I'd rather have them make appointments to come and see me. I would rather be charitable according to my convenience rather than according to their need. Can you identify with that?

You see this is a story about faith in Jesus - not only a story about what faith in Jesus can do for you. This is a story about what faith in Jesus can require of you. It may require a sensitivity to hear a cry, clear over there in Tyre and Sidon. Or in Ethiopia, or Central America. Or what may be harder - right here in New York City. To hear a cry and to do something about it.

You see, when Jesus came into the world it got bigger. The world He came into was clearly marked by boundaries. The boundaries were the rules that governed behavior. The Commandment, right from the beginning, was "Love your neighbor". But who is my neighbor? That's the question. Who's my neighbor? That could mean anybody. So they made a rule that said, my neighbor is the person who lives within the boundaries. In other words, my neighbor is the person who is just like I am...just like me. That's my neighbor. And Jesus knocked that boundary down. He said, "It's not big enough". It's not big enough for God's world. And since Jesus, neighbor now means anybody who is in need. Neighbor now means anybody whose cry you can hear. He or she is your neighbor. He told the Parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate that. Now He goes into Tyre and Sidon and illustrates it again. The same message as the Good Samaritan Parable. This time the neighbor is a Canaanite rather than a Samaritan.

The neighbor could be anybody who is in need. And that's why Christians must be sensitive. For the world for the Christian is as big as God created it. And a neighbor is not defined any more by geography, not any more. Since Jesus, a neighbor is defined by need. If you are going to be the Church, anyone in need is your neighbor.

Now that means something else for the Church. At the least it means that the Church must be open to all kinds of people. It hasn't always been that way, nor has this Church always been that way. Churches subtly communicate that we are all one class, that we are all one race, all one mind here, and if you are different, you therefore are not welcome. A lot of Churches send out that message.

OUR METHODIST HERITAGE

Our heritage as Methodists is against that. We have a tradition of freedom called, "the catholic spirit". That's what John Wesley called it. It means universale spirit. It means openness to everybody. We call it "pluralism" now-a-days.

You can get into this Church with the simplest confession of faith. That's all it takes. There's no creed you have to sign, no list of rules you have to subscribe to. As a result, we have a richness of diversity around here, an assortment of people. Anybody can get it. We've been criticized for that, looked down upon for being too inclusive. Some will tell you, the Church shouldn't be so inclusive. Somebody has said that the Methodist Church is the easiest Church to get into, and the hardest Church to get out of. That's not true, but it's almost true and I don't think that's bad.

I think it's closer to what Jesus was describing when He talked about the Kingdom of God. In fact, He said those who will have a tough time getting into the Kingdom of God are not the sinners and the doubters, but the Pharisees. That is, those who are "hung up" on rules, those who want the Kingdom to be exclusive, filled with people just like themselves. By definition the Canaanite woman was a sinner. She didn't obey the rules. But she gave a simple confession of faith, and that's all it took. She was in!

FENCING THE TABLE

To me one of the most pernicious rules laid down by the Church is a rule limiting those who can go to the Table for the Lord's Supper, for Holy Communion. Holy Communion is the principal means of grace. This limiting the table to those of certain qualifications is appropriately called "fencing the table" - keeping people away who don't qualify and it's a shame. It's clearly the sort of thing Jesus condemned.

There's a story told about a priest in the Church of England who reported to Archbishop William Temple that he had given communion to a non-Anglican, to a Methodist, incidentally, who had been ill. He confessed to the Archbishop and expected a reprimand. Instead Archbishop Temple replied:

"I am sure you were right to give communion to a Methodist in the circumstances which you describe. After all, one must be permitted to be Christian sometimes."

I like that. I thought of that last January when I bumped into a sticky situation at a nearby Episcopal Church when a parishioner objected to my sharing in the Sacrament. Sometimes rules get in the way of being Christian - even the rules of the Church. "One must be permitted to be Christian sometimes."

LOCKING THE PANTRY

Then this. There are other rules. There are rules of the world. Since Biblical times, since before Biblical times, the rule of the world has been that you don't have anything to do with the Canaanites, or the Samaritans, or whoever the enemy may be.

Who is the Canaanite for you, today? The rule says...."but Americans are to have nothing to do with those....Canaanites". You can name them. What about the Church? This is apt to be controversial, but I throw it out for your consideration. A greater sin than "fencing the table" is that of "locking the pantry". Now Jesus said, if they are hungry, feed them. If they are naked, clothe them. If they are sick, heal them. It doesn't matter on what side of the boundary they are, because neighbors are not determined by boundaries, not any more, if you follow Christ. They're not determined by rules, not even ideology. Neighbors are determined by need. If you really want to outrage people, use Church money to feed and clothe the Canaanites. That may get them mad. You see, "It's the rule of the world...you feed them one day...you'll fight them the next....they're Canaanites, for crying out loud."

Somebody will always ask, "But what side is the victim on?" What side of the boundary does he live on. For the life of me, I cannot see how a Christian can ask that. For the Christian, when someone is in need the boundaries are down.

Matthew is addressing the Church, so we called on to put ourselves in the place of the Disciples. Jesus takes us across the border into Tyre and Sidon, lets us hear the cry of the woman in need. He iterates the boundary set up by the world, the boundary that you believe in, just to let you know the full revolutionary meaning of what He's about to do. Jews have no dealings with Canaanites. And then He crosses over that boundary and heals her daughter to show us the boundaries are down. If someone is sick, you heal them. This is a story of faith - not so much the faith that gives something to you. It's the faith that requires something from you. And finally,

PROTECTING JESUS

Have you ever noticed that the Disciples are always trying to protect Jesus from the crowd? That goes on throughout the Gospels. They're always trying to protect Him...get Him off into a quiet retreat up in the mountains, just Jesus and themselves, walking in the garden while the dew is still on the roses. Like minded Disciples with their like-minded Lord. That's the way they wanted it. That's so often the way the Church would like to have it, just Jesus and us, keeping Him within the Church walls, fencing Him with rules and locking up the pantry, dispensing His grace to those we think qualify for it.

And He won't have any of that. He keeps reprimanding His disciples. He keeps going where they don't want to go, being with people that they don't want to be seen with. He keeps loving those people that they don't want to love. "Send her away" they say. "Send her away, for she is crying after us". She's a pain, a nuisance. And Jesus won't have any of it. He gives grace to those who are in need and asks nothing more. If this story is addressed to the Church, then maybe this is the message. Jesus is not so much among us. He's out there in front of us. He's out there ahead of us. He is not among us unless we are there with Him. If He is Lord, then we are to follow. He crosses all of boundaries and goes where you and I don't want to go. He's out there ahead of us. And yes, He's not among us unless we are there with Him.

ANTHEM: "Kyrie"

"Lord, have mercy upon us. Christ, have mercy upon us. Lord, have mercy upon us".

ORGAN POSTLUDE

The organ postlude - a final offering of our praise to God - is played after the Benediction. Time permitting, we invite you to share in the beauty of it.

FOR THOSE WHO SING

New members are always welcome to audition to sing in the Choir. Rehearsals are held on Wednesday evenings at 6:15 pm in the downstairs Choir Room. Now's a good time to join as the Choir begins to work on anthems for the coming months.

NEW MEMBERS TO JOIN

New members will be received into the Church in early December. Those interested in strengthening a tie with the Church this Fall are invited to be in touch with Mr. Clarke.

CHRISTMAS CARDS

Christmas cards will be available again this year through the United Methodist Women. Take a moment during the coffee hour to look over the selection and place an order.

ADULT BIBLE CLASS

An Adult Bible Class meets on Sunday mornings at 9:30 in Fellowship Hall. The Book of Acts is currently being studied. Anna Delson is teacher for this month. New members are always most welcome.

TUESDAY EVENING

The "Hounds of Heaven" study group meets on Tuesday evening at 6:30 in Fellowship Hall. George Leopold is serving as leader. The Meaning of Prayer by Fosdick is the text. New members are always most welcome.

EDUCATION COMMITTEE TO MEET

The Education Committee will meet at 6:30 pm on Thursday evening in the Russell Room. A supper will be served.

FINANCE COMMITTEE TO MEET

The Finance Committee will meet at 7 pm on Thursday evening to continue work on the 1985 Operating Budget of the Church.

CHARGE CONFERENCE

The Charge Conference of our Church will be held on Tuesday evening, October the 16th at 7:30 pm in Fellowship Hall. All members are urged to be present for this meeting. Our District Superintendent, Rev. Randy Day, will be present to preside.

WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

October 7, 1984

ORDER OF WORSHIP

11 A. M.

ORGAN "Priere du Matin" Jongen

CALL TO WORSHIP

HYMN NO. 26 "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty"

APOSTLES' CREED No. 738

GLORIA PATRI No. 792

SCRIPTURE Matthew 15: 21 - 31 Page 849

PARISH CONCERNS

ANTHEM "Kyrie" Mozart

PRESENTATION OF THE OFFERING WITH THE DOXOLOGY

HYMN NO. 192 "In Christ There Is No East Or West"

SERMON "When Rules Get In the Way" Mr. Clarke

PRAYER

THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION

The Invitation

The General Confession

The Prayer for Pardon

The Prayer of Consecration

The Prayer of Humble Access

The Agnus Dei

The Partaking of the Elements

The Prayer of Resolution

HYMN NO. 233 "Rejoice, Ye Pure In Heart"

BENEDICTION

ORGAN "Toccata in G" Pachelbel

*** Interval for Ushering

We welcome Mary Lou McGanney to the Lectern today. A native of Kalamazoo, Michigan, a graduate of Radcliffe, Mary Lou is on leave from John Jay College and currently working on a PhD degree in Educational Psychology at CUNY Graduate Center. Here in the Church, she serves as President of the United Methodist Women.

ALTAR FLOWERS

The flowers on the altar today are given by Mildred Schroedel in loving memory of her son, Robert.

USHERS

The ushers today are Len Williams, Frank Bishop, Kenneth Pew, Jonathan Wheeler and Charles Wire.

AN INVITATION

Coffee and tea will be served in the Russell Room following the service. Members and friends are invited to share in these moments of warmth made possible for us today by Helen Wilkinson, Lynn Anderson, Deborah Cox-Riches, Jane Radnay and Cathy Syble.

CHURCH SCHOOL AND NURSERY CARE

Sessions of Church School for children are offered Sunday mornings from eleven to twelve. Nursery care for infants and toddlers is available on the fourth floor.

WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY OFFERING

A special offering will be received today for the Fellowship of Suffering and Service. Envelopes are in pews for this traditional World Communion appeal. One Faith. One Hope. One Lord. One God. Celebrate!