
The Perfect Jesus and The Canaanite Woman

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 15 – Year A

What do you think about this story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman? It has always bothered me, because Jesus sounds rude, exclusive, imperfect—which doesn't fit with my image of him! I imagine a Jesus who is perfectly kind, perfectly just and merciful and inclusive. Perfectly wise. "Perfect," as in finished, unchanging, all-knowing.

I'm not the only one uncomfortable with the way Jesus comes across here, because interpreters have bent over backwards trying to make him look better and trying to reconcile the Jesus in this story with the Jesus in their heads.

Some argue that what we're seeing here is the all-knowing Jesus, after all, and he's just testing this desperate Canaanite mother: he's goading her into saying what she does to prove her faith. Others argue that the all-knowing Jesus is testing the disciples—that he and this woman feign this exchange as a teaching moment to them.

But these interpretations don't satisfy me. They try too hard to clean up what's pretty obvious, if we take the text at face value: Jesus doesn't start off knowing everything, this woman successfully challenges him, and he learns from her, and changes.

This isn't just an abstract, theological issue. It's an ethical issue, too, because, as we pray in our collect, we recognize in Jesus an example of godly life, and we ask for the grace to follow in his blessed steps. So how we imagine Jesus matters.

So what do we do with this story? And what *does* it suggest about Jesus, and the godly life?

When we meet Jesus this morning, he has just performed a series of incredible miracles: he fed 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish, walked on water, and healed crowds of people. He's been bringing life-giving teachings to anyone who will listen, and has bested the religious leaders in challenge after challenge. Jesus is at the peak of his success.

But he doesn't just sit back, resting on his laurels, staying in this area where he's comfortable and esteemed. No, he ventures out into new territory—Gentile, Canaanite territory. Where he'll be a stranger. Maybe even an enemy.

Almost as soon as he gets there, a Canaanite woman calls out to him—*"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon!"* Though an outsider, she knows all the right things to say.

Jesus doesn't answer her at all. "At all," the narrator says.

In Jesus' defense, he has a clear sense of his purpose: he has been called to the house of Israel, but she's a Canaanite, so she falls outside the bounds of his mission. She's also a woman, which means she had little status or protection, outside of the household of a man. What's more, she appears alone in public, and is talking to a strange man, which means that she is lacking in a sense of propriety. And she's a mother—a mother whose daughter is suffering, and who has set all her hope on this Jesus...

...On *this same* Jesus, who at first doesn't even answer her; and then flat-out rejects her, saying: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Then he goes so far as to compare her and her people to "dogs," which was not a compliment.

She doesn't give up. She doesn't accept the labels or limits imposed on her. And she doesn't accept the limits set on Jesus' mission, either. She counters that even the dogs deserve the "crumbs" from their masters' table—even Gentiles like her need what Jesus has to offer. And, she implies as well, he has enough to go around.

Jesus hears her, and changes his mind. He changes his mind, both about his mission and about her. He learns from her: he learns that Canaanites can have deep faith, too; and that his mission is broader than he'd realized: "Great is your faith!" he says, and heals her daughter instantly.

Yes, Jesus learns and changes and grows, as a result of his encounter with this stranger.

And maybe this isn't such a bad thing, after all. Maybe it doesn't really discredit Jesus, or make him look weak, or diminish his power or perfection, after all. Because I know this to be true: it takes a lot of strength to say, "You are right, I was wrong," and to act accordingly. I know this to be true, too: there seems to be so much self-righteousness among religious people, including Christians—so much certainty that my way is the right way, and the only way—both in our public and in our private lives.

And this makes sense, doesn't it? Because if we imagine that Christ never lost an argument, never learned from anyone else, never changed his mind, then that's what we value and imitate!

But what if we take this story at face value, and accept that the Jesus does listen and learn, and change and grow? What does it mean to take *this* as an example of the godly life?

It means that we, too, as both individuals and as a church, follow him out into unknown territory, and are willing to be a stranger in someone else's world. It means that we listen to those we'd rather dismiss, or who challenge us, or who make us uncomfortable. We learn from them, and we confess and repent when we've been wrong. And it means that we, too, keep learning and growing, for the rest of our lives—and keep looking for the ways God is stretching us and our mission, and growing God's mission on earth.