
The Syrophoenician Woman: A Healing Story

A sermon by Canon Carolynne Williams
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The son of God is often romanticized. When his parables are told in scripture he is often recalled as being kind, loving, and patient. He was also forthright and direct in his speaking to whomever, especially when he felt it was necessary. His encounter with the Syrophoenician woman, a non-Jew, I find troubling.

He is with his disciples. They are in a place where they have stopped to rest. The place is north of Tyre and Sidon, but still near the Sea of Galilee.

They are very far north of Jerusalem. They appear to be very near what is Lebanon today—beautiful countryside with marked and clear boundaries.

Those boundaries, during the time of Jesus, were not marked with signs, crossings and soldiers, but the boundaries were very clear. The boundaries were clear when one looked at the people of that region, especially the faces of the people. They were distinct in their dress and the regions were clear as to who lived where. Many were gentiles in this area. (Gentiles were sometimes referred to as dogs, in the text. Dogs during the Greco-Roman era were philosophers. They debated different types of religion.)

Boundaries were a part of living then as they are now in most of the world.

Jesus has been with his disciples and they are on a retreat of sorts. Their location is somewhat out of the way because they wanted to rest. Jesus is convinced that he and his disciples must not be distracted from his primary mission. In comparing this parable in Matthew he says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” (Matthew 15:24). They have been traveling; people have heard that they are in the area, however, their exact location has not been confirmed. They are weary and they want to rest.

The Syrophoenician woman hears about Jesus and his disciples being in the area. Her daughter is filled with demons; she is filled with unclean spirits and has become desperate for answers. She wants her daughter to be healed from the demons. She wants them exorcised (removed) from her daughter's mind and body. She has faith that this can happen and she chooses to put her faith into action. The Syrophoenician woman hears rumors as to where they are and goes to the house. She finds them and knocks on the door.

It is important to understand that centuries of bad blood have passed between Jesus, a Jew, and this Syrophoenician woman and what she represents. He is a man. She is a woman. She is disturbing their rest. She is intruding and they are tired. *But her daughter needs healing.* She wants this for her daughter. A mother who loves her child would do just as she has done. The door is opened and she falls at Jesus' feet. “Please, please gracious teacher, please heal my daughter, please heal my precious little girl. Cast out the demon. It's turned our lives into hell.”

She waits for him to answer. I can imagine that this woman's biggest fear is that he will not respond or perhaps send her away for the reasons that I have mentioned or just because he does not want to be bothered. He does not want to be disturbed.

What he says to her is "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Let the children eat first. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." (Which softens it a little.) She says, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:27-28). This was not a response that this woman wants to hear nor really try to understand."

She needs healing for her daughter and has crossed boundaries and run the risk of having the door closed in her face or being sent away. But she loves her child and wants her healed. She does not want her child to suffer any longer.

Placing the needs of the children before the puppies establishes a pecking order. This woman has to decide if she is going to have courage and ignore his comment, that is Jesus' comment or if she is going to acknowledge that he is Jesus and she needs him so she says, "But even the dogs, the puppies under the table receive some of the crumbs. Even a crumb of your power would be sufficient to do what you are able to do for me and my daughter."

She is saying, "I have faith and I am putting my faith into action. My thoughts in my head and the presence of my heart is connected to you."

We today are still afraid. We sometimes feel that we are going to be turned away so we oftentimes will not ask. We believe that because we have not been faithful or perhaps we have turned our backs on someone that may have needed help, the homeless person on the street, that our prayers are not going to be answered.

We also fear that our relationship with God may not be as strong as the neighbors because they go to church all of the time or they seem to be a better Christian. They are "nicer." Their relationship is stronger with God than mine.

They joke which circulates sometimes in some circles. One friend says to the other, "God loves us just as we are." And the other person says, "Yes, but I am his favorite." Somehow we have a tendency to allow guilt to permeate our place of peace.

We may be inclined to not take our problems to the altar, to God because we feel that God may not hear us. But God does hear us. Every time that we come to this altar, every time that we call upon the name of our God we are heard. Every time that we share with our creator what is in our hearts and upon our minds, we are heard. God knows anyhow. But it is almost as if there has to be a meeting of the mind and of the heart.

Will we be healed?

Should we expect a sprinkling of God's goodness today because we have given our concerns to God? God does perform miracles just as he did for this woman. Her daughter was healed. He told this woman to go home. Her daughter had been healed. However, there are times when our expected outcome is not the response that we receive to particular requests.

"Sometimes he steadily brings into closer and deeper relationship with him, giving contentment and peace even in the face of death" (*The Lectionary Commentary*, pg. 229).

Sometimes he heals emotional wounds, breaks the power of addiction.

Sometimes he narrows the path to the point that we see our way clear through direction, our direction, and how we interact with people. And even when the ones that we have been praying about and have been faithful about die, God's healing power is not beyond them. We no longer see them, but they are with God and they are healed.

This woman who was an outsider, this woman who defied all boundaries went to the one who she believed could help her. He was not very comforting in receiving her as he stood at the door. This woman who loved her daughter so much that her faith took her to places that she would not have normally gone, asked for help, and was responded to in the manner that *strengthened her faith*.

Go home, your faith is stronger. Go home and do not doubt. Go home and do not worry.

Be opened. Jesus spoke in Aramaic. "*Ephphatha*." Be opened. Be opened to receive the healing power of God. Your continued and strong faith will make you whole. God is merciful and helps us even when we are not aware.

Be at peace and know that is well. Be at peace and know that all will be well.

Amen.

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