

Sermon for Sunday August 16 2026
Pentecost 12 - Sunday, August 16, 2026 – Matthew 15:21-28
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I totally feel where the Canaanite woman is coming from. Oh do I feel her anguish and desperation. Any of us who are parents; grandparents; aunts; uncles; friends or who otherwise have children in our lives whom we love deeply, can probably relate to this mother on some level. Her daughter is sick. She will move mountains, transverse long-held boundaries, cross lines, take risks, put herself on the line ... she will do whatever it takes to make her plight known and to get help for her child. I totally get and relate to the Mama-bear in her.

What I don't get ... what pains my heart ... what gives me a whole, healthy dose of internal wrestling, is Jesus' response to her. Over the years, various theologians and commentators and authors have made every effort to try and explain away first his lack of response – he literally ignores her – and then his eventual spelling out that in no uncertain terms is his ministry meant for her ... that her status is akin to that of a dog. A foreign, unworthy, enemy dog.

To try and soften the blow of his words, some have explained that the literal translation of the Greek word “dog” in this case, is actually ‘puppy,’ as if this is somehow better ... when in all actuality, it still leaves her under the table, eating the crumbs off the floor.^{1 2} And if we're honest, Jesus' eventual response to her is difficult to hear and explain away and not at all reflective of the Jesus that I want tucked close to me.

The truth is, we may never understand what prompted Jesus to say what he did. He and his disciples had wandered into Canaanite territory – the land of a traditional enemy. THEY are the ones that had crossed the line between Jew and Gentile ... one would think they would have EXPECTED to bump up against others who practiced a different faith ... who believed different things. So Jesus, why oh why did you have to go there and say that to this woman who more than anything needed your compassion and care?

¹ Carla Works, “Commentary on Matthew 15:[10-20] 21-28,” Working Preacher – August 14, 2017, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2145, accessed on June 25, 2020.

² Barbara Kay Lundblad, “Matthew 15:21-28: Teaching Jesus,” Huffington Post – August 9, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/on-scripture-matthew-15-teaching-jesus_b_921497, accessed on June 25, 2020.

There are all kinds of lines being crossed in this story. Jesus is a Jew in Gentile territory; he is deemed 'clean,' she 'unclean; the woman is speaking to a man – emphasizing a gender divide; and she is speaking to someone who ranked higher socially than she did ... Jesus was a rabbi ... someone who had studied and learned. But it would appear as though his learning wasn't over. In his book entitled *A Way Other than Our Own*, Walter Brueggemann puts forth the idea that we are watching Jesus wrestle with his own vocation and the very extent to which he is being called to cross lines in order to help the other. Brueggemann writes:

*the woman is the outsider who instructs the insider. She explains to Jesus his larger vocation that he had not yet embraced ... he learns that full faithfulness means reaching beyond one's comfort zone to the other. He now, in a new way, enacts the gathering of humanity.*³

But what a road to travel to get to this point. Holding a line against another ... being in a position of power and privilege without being totally aware that that's where you're operating from ... being called out; asked to reconsider ... to come to know more in order to do better ... does this sound at all familiar? It should in this day and age.

It was a happy time back in the early 1990s. A family had gathered to celebrate the 50th anniversary of its matriarch and patriarch. There were several activities planned in the weekend long festivity ... teas, dinners, a mock wedding, a square dance even ... and family pictures. The ENTIRE family had gathered together to celebrate and since they didn't all gather in their entirety very often, you can imagine the boisterous noise of teasing and kibitzing going on. Arranging people for a portrait in this case was probably akin to trying to herd cats. But in arranging the family, the photographer chose to position people along the theme of light and dark ... both clothes and skin. A number of family members are black and biracial and the photographer was essentially emphasizing a visual of the line that existed but had not ever really been named or talked about in an obvious way. And so there everyone stood in a picture now frozen in time ... light on one side and dark on the other.

This family is mine. At the time, I remember my 16-year-old self took note, but I really didn't know how to name what was happening and I didn't know how to stop it. I do now and I continue to learn what this means. When I spoke to my cousins about this

³ Walter Brueggemann, *A Way Other than Our Own: Devotions for Lent*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2016, p 18.

sermon and using this story – because it’s their story more than it is mine – I had the opportunity to hear their experience of this time and what they remember, and in some cases, the pain they still carry with them. It was a helpful and important conversation to have ... even if it took me 28 more years to finally have it.

And I guess for me, this is another point highlighted in this story. If Jesus can get these hard conversations so wrong, what does that say and mean for the rest of us? It took me way too long to talk to my cousins about this because I felt like I didn’t know how and I was afraid. And I think Jesus’ response to the Canaanite woman is one that gives some of us pause for a lot of reasons, not the least of which is how we too can screw up these important conversations. If Jesus can get it this wrong with the Canaanite woman ... if he can choose the wrong words ... if he can approach her unaware of what privilege he may carry in that moment ... it doesn’t instill in me a lot of confidence that I ... in my own position of comfortable white privilege ... am going to get it right. But silence is no longer an option. We can no longer choose to not to engage in these difficult conversations involving race, gender, and other blatant inequalities because we fear getting it wrong and being called out on that. Choosing not to is, in fact, condoning and participating in the maintenance of racist and unequal structures and systems that are still so engrained in this world and which threaten the lives and well-being of so many.

On June 10th, Brene Brown on her podcast “Unlocking Us” hosted author, media producer, activist, educator and racial justice advocate, Austin Channing Brown. In their conversation, Channing Brown shared the following thoughts. She said:

I tell people all the time that the work of anti-racism is the work of becoming a better human ... that’s the work ... we’re becoming better humans so that we treat other humans better. It’s what we’re doing here, even though it [can] feel terrible ... but we’re also not interested in trying to hurt your feelings. We’re not interested in trying to manipulate you; we’re not interested in all the things that anti-racism educators get accused of. We are saying, ‘I think you have the capacity to be a better human ... would you ... could you accept that invitation?’⁴

The Canaanite woman was unwilling to walk away from this conversation with Jesus. She pressed on, even though I’m sure his words hurt her, but she pressed on because

⁴ Brene Brown, Podcast, “Brene Brown with Austin Channing Brown on I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World made for Whiteness,” brenebrown.com, June 10, 2020, <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-with-austin-channing-brown-on-im-still-here-black-dignity-in-a-world-made-for-whiteness/>, accessed on July 4, 2020.

the life of her child was at stake. And, ultimately, what she offered to Jesus, was an opportunity to expand his ministry to embrace ALL of humanity ... to cross a line in order to offer love and care to ALL people. And for his part, Jesus hung in there, even when the conversation was difficult ... Jesus didn't allow himself to stay stuck where he was... he didn't storm away when the Canaanite woman challenged him. He is open enough to learn from her – a desperate woman who came from an enemy territory. He allowed her to pull him over the line that had been established by years of social and religious expectation and tradition, and Jesus meets the Canaanite woman where she is at; on her turf. He ultimately heals her daughter from within her own race, culture and country ... no conversion necessary.

This is where God's grace always meets me in this story. Neither Jesus nor the woman remain bound by the lines that divided them ... the concept of ancient purity ... race, gender, education ... and even though Jesus didn't get the conversation right at the beginning, he stayed for the hard stuff; he was open to being taught and doing better. And the woman, whose desperate and stubborn refusal to see her daughter made well, she didn't give up either. She believed in this man - this preacher, teacher and healer and the love of the God she knew he embodied.

Are we going to get the hard conversations right 100% of the time? Not on your life. Do we still need to engage in these difficult but life-giving conversations? Yes. 100% of the time. Those of us who sit in a position of privilege are called to enter into these conversations in love ... to walk alongside and to be taught, which includes being quiet and listening, but then to also use our voices to advocate for and with others ... to become aware of our privilege and to use it as a means to rise up against injustice. It means being called out when we don't get it right. Just like the Canaanite woman did with Jesus so many years ago.

May it be so with us. AMEN.