

## Mercy Unbounded

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

Jesus says, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”<sup>Matt 5:7</sup> Jesus says to those who follow him, “Ask, and it will be given you.”<sup>7:7</sup> But when a Canaanite mother *follows* him and *asks* for *mercy*, first he ignores her, and then, when she persists, Jesus grumbles to the disciples, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” and says to her, “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

I’m sorry—what??

What happened to “Blessed are the merciful”??

What happened to “Ask, and it will be given you”??

This Canaanite woman literally follows Jesus, acclaiming him as Lord and Son of David, so she knows he’s the Messiah. She cries out: “Have mercy on me!” She begs him to heal her daughter,<sup>1</sup> who is tormented by a demon—precisely the kind of spiritual affliction Jesus has been curing since the beginning of his ministry!<sup>4:24</sup> So to help her would be “like taking the children’s food and throwing it to the dogs”? That’s so mean and insulting! Christian interpreters have struggled with this story for centuries, finding Jesus to be uncharacteristically harsh. And indeed, this is totally uncharacteristic of Jesus in Matthew.

I have a discovery to share with you this morning, and afterwards, I hope you'll love this passage as much as I do! Maybe you're thinking, "No! Jesus was mean to the Canaanite woman! I don't like Mean Jesus and I wish this story weren't in the Bible!" I understand, and I respond: if the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman makes you feel unsettled, that's excellent, because you're experiencing exactly what Matthew wants you to experience! Matthew is a brilliant storyteller, and this story is designed to unsettle all who hear it.

How do we know? Here's how. Matthew has this story from his blessed Evangelist colleague, Mark. <sup>(Mark 7)</sup> Matthew has made changes to convey that the grace of God unsettles boundaries some in his community were trying to maintain between "us" and "them," between Israelites and so-called "Canaanites." Now, the actual Canaanites were long gone by the time Matthew was writing his Gospel. So Matthew is asking his folks to rethink the division between Jews and Gentile "outsiders" who follow Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

Matthew is so smart about this. He gives us a hyperbolically mean Jesus who initially rebuffs a desperate mother and practically calls her people dogs. Is he serious? That's the question. As with any good story, there's background we need to know. Three things are super important for background here.

- 1) First, Matthew opens his Gospel with a long genealogy of Jesus, showing how in the lineage of David, Jesus is the Messiah for whom the Jews have been waiting. You never hear this genealogy read in church, because it's name after

name after name for, like, five minutes straight. Here's the thing: there are women in there, which is rare in biblical genealogies.<sup>3</sup> "Abraham the father of Isaac ... Isaac the father of Jacob," and so on. Then Matthew wings in there, "Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar"—hang on, "by Tamar"? Then "Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab"—what, a second woman? This is off the rails for normal genealogies! Then "Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth"—seriously, a third woman?? By now we're all, "OK, what else you got, Matthew? Bring it on," and he does: "David the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah." Holy moly! In the lineage of Jesus the Messiah are Tamar, thought to have been Canaanite; then Rahab the definite Canaanite; then Ruth the Moabite (Moab being an enemy of the Jews); and the King David connection is linked, through adultery, to Bathsheba, the wife of another guy who was a Hittite—the Hittites being Canaanites—David then acting scurrilously in having the loyal husband betrayed on the battlefield and killed. For Matthew, Gentile women have been in the lineage of the Messiah forever, and any treachery is on the side of Judah.<sup>4</sup>

2) Second background point: only Matthew gives us the visit of the Magi at Jesus' birth, that beautiful story we hear at Epiphany: 3 foreign sages (3 "kings," in later tradition) journey to Bethlehem to honor baby Jesus with gold, frankincense, and myrrh.<sup>2:1-2</sup> Gentile women all the way back in Jesus' lineage, and Gentile sages at the manger, the very first ones to bow before Jesus!

3) Third: after Jesus launches his healing ministry, Jesus heals the servant of a centurion—a Roman army commander, who believes Jesus can do this miracle long-distance (he’s right) and whose faith Jesus commends.<sup>8:5–13</sup>

The Canaanite mother, and the Roman centurion before her, believe in Jesus’ healing power despite towering walls of hostility against them. The Romans were a brutal army occupying ancient Palestine, mercilessly taxing Judeans, incarcerating and crucifying anyone who resisted the Roman empire. The Canaanites, indigenous peoples who were in Palestine long before the Israelites came into the land, are portrayed in the Bible as bellicose antagonists whose women lured Israelite males into idolatry.<sup>5</sup> Yet a *Roman army commander* and a “*Canaanite*” woman are commended for the faith they have in Jesus!

Wow. We have to think about this story again. Here comes my discovery.

Remembering everything Matthew has done to include Gentile outsiders from literally verse 3 at the beginning of his Gospel—when Jesus coldly rebuffs the Canaanite woman, maybe we should ask: Is this ... some kind of test?

Yes. Yes, it is! For the disciples.

This is all unfolding in front of the disciples, who *are* mean and tell Jesus to get rid of this desperate Canaanite woman. She persists. She’s following Jesus, she’s asking for mercy, she’s seeking, she’s knocking, just as Jesus told his followers to do.<sup>7:7</sup> She is the best example of persistent faith in the entire Bible. That is beautiful! Jesus is testing the disciples to see if they can figure out something absolutely crucial to the good news: God’s grace includes outsiders.<sup>6</sup> The Canaanite woman

declines to be kept on the outside of the community—she’s all, “um, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table, Apparently-Mean Jesus!”<sup>7</sup> And what does Jesus do? He immediately commends her faith and heals her daughter. Anyone who believes in the power of Jesus will be healed. Jesus is teaching his disciples to move beyond the boundaries and prejudices their traditions had set up. To live into a community in which absolutely everyone will be healed by the radically expansive grace of God!

Look, I’m done here, but I just want to say one more thing: our story comes right after Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for using legal reasoning to authorize withholding support from one’s father and mother, “[breaking] the commandment of God for the sake of tradition.”<sup>15:3</sup> Jesus scolds those tradition-keepers, “Stop ignoring how we’re supposed to care for one another!”—that’s the first part of Matthew 15—and then comes our story. With the Canaanite woman begging for mercy, Jesus mouths tradition—“I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”—to show the disciples, “This is what it would look like, being so rigid about tradition that you’d ignore a desperate mother sobbing at your feet!” And in the next breath, Jesus says to the Canaanite woman, “Great is *your* faith!”<sup>8</sup> That’s the faith to which the disciples should aspire.

This is not “Mean Jesus.”

This is Ironic Teacher Jesus, modeling hyperbolically harsh rejection of a vulnerable outsider according to a tradition that’s true on one level, which is how

irony works—Jesus *was* sent [first] to the lost sheep of the house of Israel—then, by commending the woman and healing her daughter, showing the disciples that Israel’s priority should never be used to exclude others from God’s mercy.<sup>9</sup>

Matthew has given us a riveting conflict, starring Jesus in an ironic performance with a deeply moving twist at the end, to teach followers of Jesus that we need to let go of our boundaries and prejudices in order to participate in God’s expansive grace.

From the beginning of his Gospel, Matthew has been shouting the good news:

In the lineage of Jesus the Messiah,  
                   at Jesus’ birth,  
                           and in his healing ministry,

Jesus brings every possible outsider into the community of those healed by God’s grace. Not displacing Israel—joining Israel.<sup>10</sup>

Which means there’s room for you and me in the mercy of God!

No matter who we are. No matter what we’ve done.

No matter what prejudices and antagonisms might come at us.

There’s room for you and me! Thanks be to God.

In the Name of the One who is the Fount of every blessing:

Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

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Proper 15A

Genesis 45:1–15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1–2a, 29–32; Matthew 15:21–28

Preached at St. Thomas’s Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

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<sup>1</sup> That she calls Jesus “Son of David” and needs healing for her daughter are integrally related. Matthias Konradt writes, “When tracing the title Son of David through the portrait of Jesus’ ministry beginning in 4.17, one consistently finds it being used in connection with Jesus’ healing activity,” and it is “characteristic of Matthew to speak of Jesus as healing not just many but *all*” (*Israel, Church, and the Gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew*, translated by Kathleen Ess [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014], 39; emphasis original).

<sup>2</sup> Every Gospel makes this move in its own unique way and diction, showing Jesus unsettling and rendering porous the familiar ethnic, political, and religious divisions of his day through the boundary-crossing grace of God. Consider, for example, Jesus at the well with the Samaritan woman in John 4. This world-changing possibility is explored in other New Testament literature as well, through a rich variety of metaphors and theological claims. See Eph 2:14 on Christ being our peace; Romans 9–11 on Christians being grafted into the fruitful vine that is Israel; and Gal 3:28 on there no longer being a distinction between Jew and Greek, since all are one in Christ Jesus. Many other texts could be cited.

<sup>3</sup> In a small number of genealogical passages in which a daughter needs to be mentioned as heir or distinctions were deemed important among offspring of a man’s primary and secondary wives, a few women’s names are recorded. See Gen 22:20–24; 25:1–6; 35:22–26; 1 Chr 2:18–21, 24, 35, 46–49; 3:1–9.

<sup>4</sup> “Any treachery is on the side of Judah”: this is transparently clear in Genesis 38, the story of Tamar. Her two husbands, sons of the patriarch Judah, are said to have been “wicked” and noncompliant with the norm governing levirate marriage, respectively, such that the LORD kills both of them (Gen 38:7, 10). Then her father-in-law, Judah, sends her away, she tricks him into impregnating her, he almost has her executed by burning, and she proves his malfeasance, leading him to declare, “She is more in the right than I” (38:11–26). That David acts sinfully in the matter

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of impregnating Bathsheba and having Uriah abandoned to die on the battlefield is explicitly judged as appalling by the biblical narrator (2 Samuel 11:1–12:19).

<sup>5</sup> See Numbers 25, Deuteronomy 20, and numerous other texts throughout the Pentateuch, Joshua, and Judges.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to Matthew’s storytelling that the healing in Matthew 15 occurs in public, with the disciples actively involved in trying to block the woman’s access to Jesus. In the parallel story in Mark 7:24–30, Jesus does not say the line about having been sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel; he heals the daughter in a private setting, with the miraculous results known only later, and does not commend the woman’s faith. The changes Matthew has made to the earlier tradition are striking and of enormous significance for his Gospel.

<sup>7</sup> Many interpreters frame this as a battle of wits and observe that the Canaanite woman is being represented as having bested Jesus. I celebrate feminist and other readings that honor her persistence and ingenuity. She is a model of faith indeed! But I am not persuaded that Matthew intends us to see Jesus as having been manipulated by the woman’s verbal agility into healing her daughter when he had otherwise resolved not to do so. Matthew is intent on demonstrating the radical expansiveness and power of God’s grace in Christ for marginalized outsiders.

<sup>8</sup> Walter T. Wilson (*The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 1, Matthew 1–13*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022]) and other interpreters find significant the juxtaposition of feeding stories—symbolic and literal—in the story of the Canaanite woman and the immediately following story of Jesus feeding the 4,000 (15:29–39). I agree. Matthew’s intentional and artful juxtaposition *also* includes the vitally important preceding disputation story, where Jesus presses his adversaries to expand their hermeneutical and ethical framework and move beyond the limitations of tradition.

<sup>9</sup> See the definition of irony in Carolyn J. Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* (Indiana University Press, 2009), 24: “Irony is a performance of misdirection that generates aporetic interactions between an unreliable ‘said’ and a truer ‘unsaid’ so as to persuade us of something that is subtler, more complex, or more profound than the apparent meaning. Irony disrupts cultural assumptions about the narrative coherence that seems to ground tropological and epistemological transactions, inviting us into an experience of alterity that moves us toward new insight by problematizing false understandings.” Many interpreters have worked on irony in biblical texts; see the bibliography in my *Irony and Meaning* and the essays and literature cited in Tobias Häner, Virginia Miller, and Carolyn J. Sharp, eds., *Irony in the Bible: Between Subversion and Innovation*, *Biblical Interpretation* 209 (Leiden: Brill, 2023). The story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 has drawn interpretive attention for the potentially ironic or joking nature of Jesus’ words. One scholar who argues that Matt 15:21–28 shows Jesus being ironic is Enoch O. Okode, “Let ‘the Children’ and ‘the Dogs’ Have Bread: Matthew’s Portrait of Jesus



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as a Merciful Royal Benefactor in Matt 15:21–28,” *Trinity Journal* 41NS (2020): 3–17, esp. 12–13. For other sources open to the view that Jesus is reversing traditional teaching through ironic performance that counters accepted views, see the references in Okode, 13n35. Of the disciples’ mission in 10:5–6 being only “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” Okode says the point concerns “covenantal priority rather than an exclusive ethnic right” (13n34). I am persuaded that Matthew intends this also about Jesus’ own mission: the enduring priority accorded Israel neither requires nor enacts the exclusion of others. In addition to the texts already cited in my sermon about Gentiles in earlier chapters of Matthew, we see in Matthew 4 that Jesus has been “curing every disease and every sickness” in “great crowds” of people from all over, including the Decapolis, a group of ten cities east of the Sea of Galilee that were inhabited by a majority of Greeks. As Walter Wilson observes, Matthew 4 portrays Jesus’ healing ministry in terms “not only of remarkable success but also of rapidly expanding social and geographical horizons,” seeing this as a “symbolic mapping” that includes the Decapolis, “a region ... populated largely by non-Jews” (*Gospel of Matthew* 1:125–126, 128).

<sup>10</sup> Many interpreters have discerned this crucial dimension of the Gospel of Matthew, viz., showing Gentiles as invited to join Israel rather than performing a supersessionist ecclesiology, something for which Matthew is often critiqued. The literature addressing Israel and the Gentiles in Matthew is vast. See Konradt’s *Israel, Church, and the Gentiles* and the sources cited there. For a more evangelical perspective, see Philip Suciadi Chia, “The Word *Ekklēsia* in Matthew and Its Implication for Social Justice” (*Biblical Theology Bulletin* 51/1 [2021]: 24–32) and the bibliography there.