

Pentecost 11A 2020

Opening

In the midst of a pandemic, one understands the desire to find a change of scenery. After months of quarantine, phased re-openings, a brief getaway from the familiar walls of your home sounds quite good. Of course, travel isn't straightforward in these days. If you can find a place of retreat and a new setting, though, you can face adversity with renewed strength.

The conditions are different, the purpose the same. Jesus travels north from Galilee to the region of Tyre and Sidon with his disciples so they can get some space from the constant press of crowds. That seems to be the reason for the journey—take rest for body and soul. Exhaustion is setting in for Jesus and his disciples. Northbound to Tyre and Sidon. //

Some of my favorite stories give such a rich setting that places become like characters in the story. Take a large manor house with numerous rooms in a murder mystery like Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* (one of my favorites). The house becomes a figure for the secrets of its guests.

Tyre and Sidon is a large, looming presence in this story. The region of Tyre and Sidon is **outside of Israel**, across the northern border, in modern day Lebanon. In Jesus' time they are Phoenician cities which means there's a mixed history—both ancient and recent—with Israel and specifically, Galilee. Solomon got timber to build the Lord's temple and his own palace from Tyre. Some good days in David and Solomon's time, but not so much near the time of Jesus. Tyre and Sidon sold Judah and Jerusalem as slaves to the Greeks. The prophets Joel and Amos spoke judgment against them for that. In Jesus' time, Galilee was poor and suffered food shortages; Tyre seems to be a main reason based on their economic strength.¹ And I haven't even mentioned the numerous idols, gods, and profane rituals in Tyre's religious system. Not a cozy history here.

¹ Emily J. Thomassen, *Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels*, 2016.

We miss those associations living in the 21st century. We understand bad relations between bordering cities though. There's no love lost between San Francisco and Los Angeles. It's not just baseball and football; access to water stokes the animosity.

Now relations between Galilee and the region of Tyre/Sidon weren't so *bad* in Jesus' time; otherwise our Lord would not have traveled there. But it shows how urgent he needs to find rest with his disciples. He travels to an undesirable place to catch his breath.

Enter A Desperate Mother

Then a desperate mother invades the respite our Lord seeks with his disciples. /A parent takes this kind of risk when her child suffers a debilitating affliction. She'll risk a rebuke or rejection if somehow the healer will see her suffering child.

But this woman—this pagan woman who comes from a region known for Baal worship, temple prostitution, and even more unmentionable actions—she speaks words you don't hear in Tyre or Sidon. "*Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.*" There's a confession of faith in there—*O Lord, Son of David*. She's confessing the God of Israel as Lord; she believes Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of David and the Lord.

Should make the Lord turn his head. But it doesn't. She appeals to the disciples for help next. Then Matthew tells us the disciples *begged* Jesus to dismiss her. /

If Jesus' response to this Canaanite woman sounds prickly, just remember how he spoke to his mother early in his ministry. 'Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come.'² Those are the words our Lord Jesus spoke to his mother, the Virgin Mary, at Cana when a wedding party ran out of wine. / Can you imagine a Tennessee boy speaking to his mother in this way when she asked him for help? I suspect he will meet a very different response.

² John 2.4

Something else is happening besides rudeness when the Lord Jesus rebuffs a request like this. This is the same Jesus who gathered these same disciples at his feet and said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” And now a desperate mother—a woman from a pagan nation—who meets at least three criteria from the Beatitudes, kneels at our Lord’s feet begging for mercy.

Our Lord has not suddenly abandoned his beatitudes, yet we have to wrestle with his first response. Jesus says, “I was sent *only* to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” We have a puzzle on our hands. And that means we have to take a brief excursion to the past. We have to see the strange way God chooses to redeem his world.

The History of a Toxic Relationship

After Adam and Eve fall into sin and death, sin spreads like a virus—a pandemic, if you will—across the nations. The Lord chooses one family—Noah’s family—to deal with the sin problem. After the flood waters recede, the sin virus begins spreading again as soon as Noah’s family descends the ark’s gangplank. Then all the nations of the world disperse in all directions, but they converge again at a land called Shinar and there they build a tower so they can be as great as God. The Tower of Babel is peak pandemic of the sin virus.

How does God deal with the sin pandemic? One family—Abraham and Sarah. Their sons will become one nation. Through *this one*, small nation called Israel, God will redeem his world. He gives one nation his wisdom, his worship, his relationship, his promises on Mt Sinai. God doesn’t gather the world at Mt Sinai. He gathers Israel. God starts small. He chooses one nation to deal with the worldwide sin disease. /

It’s not how we would fix a massive problem. We’re Americans. We think on a grand scale. Big solutions for big problems, right? That’s *not* how the Lord works. Throughout the grand story of the Bible, God so often chooses one king, one prophet, one place to redeem a world gone wrong. /

The Old Testament is a remarkable story precisely because God's chosen people, Israel, *worsen the sin problem* instead of redeeming it. (as NT Wright has said).

Reading this Gospel story while we've been reading the Books of Hosea and Amos in the Daily Office is a jarring experience. God commands Hosea to marry the prostitute, Gomer, because Israel has become a serial spiritual adulteress in her love of idols. The more the Lord pursues Israel in love, the more she worships other gods. Just on the surface of things, you'd have to say that the living God has gotten himself into a toxic relationship with Israel. Any relationship this bad needs serious therapy. Only God can remain in this disastrous relationship because his love is endless.

He's determined to save the world, *but he won't give up on Israel, his beloved*. He won't cast her aside. If you were to read Hosea like you read a novel, you'd be hoping God would just walk away for his own good. But he doesn't and he won't. Hosea's adulterous wife stands on an auction block, about to be sold into slavery and God tells Hosea, "Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods."³ God is not a man who becomes wounded, resentful, spiteful when scorned by the one he loves. Through Hosea the Lord says, "I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath." The Lord's ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts.⁴

Israel Alone in Christ Alone

He's determined to save the world, but he will *still* save it through Israel, even though her sin problem multiplies the world's sin problem. That's why God distills Israel into one man—his Son, Jesus Christ.

³ Hosea 3.1

⁴ Isaiah 55.8-9

If there's a major part of Jesus' life we misunderstand, it must be this. The mission of the Lord Jesus was *the house of Israel first and foremost*. That's not a rejection of other nations—it's the *order* by which God redeems the world's sin pandemic.

Think of it this way. When we get a coronavirus vaccine (Lord, hear our prayer), who should be some of the first recipients? First responders like doctors and nurses. Because healers need immunity from this disease so they can administer healing on a global scale.

Israel was meant to be the first responder to the love of God. When Jesus says, "I was sent only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel," all his teaching, healings, signs and wonders were meant to heal Israel to be a nation of healers *for the sake of the world*. That's the plan, the order of God's salvation for Israel *and then* the whole world. Jesus' first refusal is another way of saying, "it's not time yet. The Day of Pentecost isn't here yet." Jesus' mission on earth was Israel, the cross, the empty tomb. He commissions his disciples to then preach the Gospel to the nations. Paul will be the vanguard for preaching the Gospel among the nations, not Jesus himself.

Then there's this thorny little bit *after* Jesus' lost sheep statement. The desperate mother implores Jesus again saying, "Lord, help me." To which the Lord Jesus says, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." It sounds hateful on the surface, but only if you forget Israel's story and her history.

But if this "children's bread" figure of speech means something more—covenant relationship with the Creator God, the Word of God, his wisdom, his worship—then it's not a personal affront.

Remember where this encounter happens. Tyre and Sidon. Within walking distance of this encounter was likely a temple devoted to Baal, the most beloved idol among God's people. And within walking distance of that temple is likely another temple devoted to prostitution as an act of religious observance. Proclaiming the Ten Commandments here would fall on deaf ears. They'd tune you out in Tyre before you finished saying, "You shall have no other gods before me..."

The Courage of the Canaanite Woman

The fact that the story continues after this statement is remarkable. Our Canaanite heroine doesn't walk away after two refusals. She remains kneeling at Jesus' feet, then says, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."⁵ And there in complete humility; throwing herself at Jesus as her only hope; hungering for mercy; calling him Lord, you hear the kind of faith Jesus was searching to find *in Israel*. What was missing from Jerusalem's Temple strangely appears in the shadows of pagan temples in Tyre and Sidon—faith that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And it all takes place *before* the Day of Pentecost arrives when the Spirit of God was poured out on the nations.

It had been God's plan to redeem the nations all along, but to heal the nations *through* Israel. That would come with Pentecost and Paul's missionary journeys. But this mother jumped the queue, yet without any presumption or entitlement. That's the power of faith spoken with humility; that's the power of faith with reckless abandon in Jesus alone. *She's humble ,yet bold. She's determined to be dependent on God alone.* She shows the faith and heart Israel should have had all along.

When the Future Breaks into the Present

And by so doing, she not only becomes an example of what Israel's faith should be, but also what our faith should be—we, mostly Gentiles, who were not born into the people of Israel. To confess Jesus as Lord; to plead for mercy at his feet; to speak with humility *and* boldness; that's what true faith looks like.

Can you imagine hearing the Lord Jesus say of you? "Great is your faith!" / All other aspirations in this life seem so small. To hear the Lord Jesus say "Great is your faith!" let that be the greatest desire of my heart.

⁵ Matthew 15.27

And this kind of great faith brings healing—instantaneous healing for this woman's daughter. The Lord Jesus is the Healer, but this girl would not have been freed from demonic spirits without the persistent faith of her mother.

This kind of great faith ushers in healing, but in the mystery of God, it *also* brought the future forward. This woman's faith gives us a preview of the post-Pentecost world before the Holy Spirit blew a mighty wind through Jerusalem and descended on Jesus' chosen servants with tongues of fire.

I wonder if our faith could give others a glimpse of God's future, his new creation, his new Jerusalem. Our work is not the healing of all that has gone wrong; our work is radical faith in the Lord Jesus. The story is ever so strange, yet true. Great faith joined with the work of our Lord Jesus gives us a foretaste of God's glorious future sooner than we expect. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.