Text: Matthew 15:21-28

**Introduction**

If you exclude the incarnation, passion and resurrection accounts for a second. Because those are the things of the creed. They are so important they are held before us – they are remembered - every time the church gathers. So bracket them off, and ask the question what is the most important teaching story from Jesus that we need to hear?

Individuals would certainly have different answers. Different ages and places and peoples would rightly have different answers. The troubles of a place or the besetting sins of an age are different. But for us, I very well might choose today’s gospel reading.

We look at everything though prisms of race and sex. Our morality tends to be based on one dimension – fairness, at most two dimensions, with harm being the other. We confuse the good with being nice.

And it doesn’t help that the realm of politics is the only place we have to talk about these things anymore. Because politics is always about two things: money and power. Placing your ethics and maybe even your hope in the realm of money and power is a terrible choice. Money and power are things of the letter not things of the Spirit. And it makes it real hard to hear what the Spirit might be saying when money and power appear threatened.

It has become popular in some circles, because what Jesus says doesn’t sound nice, might even sound bigoted, to put forward here that Jesus learned something. And it is not that Jesus didn’t learn things. Luke ends his story of the boy Jesus in the temple with the statement that he grew in wisdom. But if you have heard any of those sermons, saying Jesus learned is the nice less offensive way of saying he sinned. I have a doctrinal and confessional bar from saying something like that. The lamb of God was spotless. Those things remembered every week become meaningless without that.

**Canaanite & Jew**

So, let’s try and think through this story and listen to what the Spirit might be telling us, even though it might be hard.

The first thing that we should note is where Jesus and his disciples are at. They are in the district of Tyre and Sidon. That is way up north on the coast. In Old Testament times is would have been Phoenicia, not really even part of the story of Israel. In the time of Jesus a Gentile territory butting up against Galilee. Jesus is up here letting things cool down a bit. Some Scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem had come up to Galilee after the feeding of the 5000 to confront what is going on and Jesus has called them hypocrites. Called them out in strong enough words that even the disciples are a bit unnerved approaching Jesus and asking him “Do you know they were offended when you said this?” Jesus has gone deep into Gentile territory with 12 Jewish men for a reason. They need to learn something about offence and humility. He also needs to just disappear for bit.

While they are there, a woman comes out to him crying out. My consistent complaint about our translations applies here. It should probably be something like she shrieked unceasingly. And Matthew is very specific about who this woman is – a Canaanite. He doesn’t just say gentile. He doesn’t as the evangelist Mark uses say Syro-Phoenician. Matthew calls her a Canaanite. Someone that if Israel had followed the dictates of God after the exodus would not exist. Because the Canaanites were to be killed. Someone from a people that constantly lead Israel away from Yahweh toward the Baals and Asheras. Someone representative of everything not Israel. Someone with no part in the Jewish messiah.

Which stages the question: what does the potential messiah Jesus say about this ancient division: Jew and Canaanite?

But the woman isn’t just a Canaanite seeking out the miracle worker. She comes at Jesus with two specific titles: Lord and Son of David. Lord is a recognition of power and authority. It’s actually what Baal means. So by itself she might just have been calling on her Canaanite Baal. But it is paired with Son of David. The Canaanite is submitting to the Jewish King. This is something new.

And at first Jesus doesn’t answer. It is his disciples that produce the first answer. “Send her away, she troubles us.” To the disciples the ancient divisions are to be respected…upheld. Israel is physical Israel and this Canaanite is not part of that. And in what Jesus says he heightens this division twice. “I was sent only the lost sheep of Israel.” Which doesn’t dissuade this woman who repeats her request, “Lord, help me.” So he makes it sharper, more pungent. “It’s not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” You can argue at just how offensive the word used would be, but you can’t really argue that it was nice.

Let’s pause the story and collect a first point here. Neither the woman nor Jesus deny that traits like Canaanite or Jew exist. Jesus words in fact heighten the division as much as they can. And this reminds me of a repeated phrase from the book of Revelation. Even in heaven when John is seeing all the saints, traits like nation and tribe and people and language are still visible. These are not unimportant things. They survive to be recognized in the eschaton in some way. But in that vision they are all secondary things. The primary thing being all the saints wear the white robes and cry out with a loud voice to the Lamb. The disciples think Jesus is the Jewish messiah. Jesus’ words are the strong form of their understanding. The woman is asserting He is the messiah from the Jews. She is asserting that the old divisions must become reconciled in the Kingdom. And that makes all the difference in the world. Because the Son of David does for the Canaanite as she desires.

It is not that race or sex are things that can be ignored. They are realities. But when we elevate them to the ultimate reality, the prisms through which everything must be viewed, we’ve missed the mark. We’ve turned them into idols. And that is what the world does, the world is an idol factory. But the church can’t do that. Disciples cannot act like the messiah is just our messiah. Because the church needs to be the church in districts of Tyre and Sidon: from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria and the ends of the earth. Jesus is the messiah from the Jews, but he is the messiah for all peoples.

**Good and Nice**

The second thing I want to ponder is that difference between good and nice. And I think this is more what has motivated some of the worst preaching I’ve listened to on this text. Because I’ll admit it, calling someone a dog is an insult. It is not nice. And even if you want to say that Jesus is just representing the disciples’ understanding, he still gives voice to it.

Why would he do this? Why aren’t those less doctrinally constrained preachers right that this is an example of Jesus sinning?

Let me ask this question first, what is the desire, the purpose of God? “God desires that all would be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.” That’s what Paul writes. John would say “these things are written that you might believe.” The purpose of God is that you would have faith that He loves you and has redeemed you. That his love is more than enough. And that this love is not for physical Israel alone, but this love is for the cosmos. For God so loved the cosmos – the world.

Listen closely to the woman’s answer to Jesus’ harshest point. “Yes, Lord.” She isn’t denying the cultural and physical gulf. She understands the immensity of the request. “Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Her assertion is that the crumbs from this one are enough. And when you think what she is saying are crumbs is the exorcism and restoration of her daughter, you get a better feel for how big she thinks this table is. The crumbs of mercy from the God of Israel are enough for even Canaan. It is Jesus’ offensiveness that does two things. It brings forth this miraculous statement of faith.

And Jesus response captures the greater miracle here. “O woman, great is your faith.” Without anything in the way of proof. With 1000s of years of enmity between. With everyone standing around telling Jesus to get rid of her. She believes that the Love of this LORD is enough. That the Love of this LORD covers even her. That he will answer her prayers. Which he does instantly. It’s staggering. And his act of healing Canaan says something profound to those disciples. It is Jesus’ willingness to say what his disciples were thinking, how they were asking him to act, that points out the ugliness of that, and how what Jesus has called them to is much bigger than some vanished physical Kingdom. How The Kingdom of Heaven reconciles Canaanite and Jew.

The salvation and deliverance of all people is good.

The creation of faith is good.

The demonstration of the love of God for all people is good.

The correction of the disciples’ understanding is good.

The exorcism of the daughter of Canaan is good. Let the exorcism of the gentiles start with the deepest enmity. Let the disciples know the extent of the call.

And we would never have understood the depth of the goodness of Jesus, if everything was nice.

Nice papers over differences. Nice ignores them. The good reconciles them.

This Canaanite woman and the Jewish disciples must be one in Christ. Which requires reconciliation. The deeper the wound, the harsher the treatment to heal.

Of course being good instead of nice will often lead to the cross. No good deed goes unpunished.

**Conclusion**

The real question is are we willing to be good, or do we settle for nice? And even if we make friends and influence people, gains us nothing lasting. Amen.