

Compassion Stretching
Matthew 15:21-28
August 20, 2023
First Presbyterian, Luling

I'm starting off with a confession this morning. I haven't preached on this passage, nor its parallel passage in Mark, in twenty years. I did so once, long ago, but I've not returned to it. The reason is because I don't like it. Just to be clear, that's not a good reason to avoid preaching on a passage. I don't like the way Jesus treats this woman, and I don't like the attempts I've read and heard to excuse away his words, and I don't like the way this woman has been made into a heroine for standing up to Jesus. In short, I've neither read nor heard any interpretation of this story that is persuasive. I'm uncomfortable with what Jesus says to her, and I'm uncomfortable with the disciples' reaction, and I'm uncomfortable with the way she acts, too. I believe I'm making it clear that I don't like it.

But here it is. Right here in Matthew. Also in Mark, in a slightly different form. Right here in the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. And so, at least this year, well, at least earlier in the week when I was deciding what to preach on, I decided to take it seriously and try again. That seemed like less and less of a good idea as the week progressed, but it's still here, and so we're going to wrestle with it this morning. I'm probably still not going to like it, but you're free, as always, to draw your own conclusions.

With that as an introduction, let's take a close look at the passage and see what's actually there. Jesus has been in a disagreement with the Pharisees, and decides to leave that place, which is on the Sea of Galilee, where he and the disciples were headed in the walking on water passage from last week. He goes into a Gentile area, Tyre and Sidon. And there a woman, a Canaanite woman, approaches him. Mark calls her, more correctly, a Syro-Phoenician woman. To call her a Canaanite is to stir up old prejudices, specifically religious prejudices. The Canaanites had been in the land when the Israelites arrived, way back in Joshua's time. The Israelites were warned against Canaanite gods and prohibited from interacting with the Canaanite people. But people had not been called Canaanites in centuries, so for Matthew to identify her as a Canaanite is probably an intentional way to demean her, right from the beginning of the story. It doesn't take us much imagination to come up with a similar, derogatory term for a group of people, that we no longer use.

She sees Jesus and repeatedly shouts, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." Notice that she's already calling Jesus "Lord." She's clearly heard about him, because she knows to come to him to ask for help for her daughter. And she has heard enough about him to call him Lord, Son of David. While she's shouting at him to help her daughter, he ignores her. The disciples repeatedly urge him to send her away, because she won't stop. But they have underestimated a mama seeking help for her daughter.

Then the dialogue between Jesus and the woman begins. He says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." She increases her efforts, by kneeling in front of him, a clear indication of reverence and worship, like people would kneel before a king. Again, she calls him Lord. And again she says, "help me." He answers her by saying the same thing he said, in different words. "It is not fair to take their children's food and throw it to the dogs." Presumably, the children are equivalent to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" and dogs are equivalent to this Canaanite woman. I don't know how this can be construed as anything other than an insult. She comes back quickly with "Yes, Lord," again calling him Lord, "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." And then he closes the conversation "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

I don't like it. Why didn't Jesus just help her the first time she asked, like he has lots of other people, that huge crowd he had compassion on in just the previous chapter. He'll again have compassion on a huge and hungry crowd in just a few more verses. But why doesn't he have compassion for her? She's a desperate mother, seeking help for her daughter.

And a conclusion that we should be like the woman, persistent, pushy, essentially telling Jesus he's wrong, well, that sits uneasily with me, too. Maybe I'm ashamed because I don't know if I would be that pushy. But being that pushy against Jesus, Lord, Son of David, that seems disrespectful and rude.

I proclaimed confidently last week that the Gospel writers share these stories in order to tell us something about Jesus. I was pretty definite about it. So now we have to ask: what does this story tell us about Jesus? I hadn't intended for these few weeks to be a sermon series, but I do see a through-line of compassion in these stories that Matthew shares. He has compassion on the crowd of 5000, heals their sicknesses and feeds them. Last week, we learned that Jesus has compassion on the disciples, who are scared in the storm, so much compassion that he walks on the water to get to them. Immediately following this encounter with the woman, he heals some more people from a big crowd, and then feeds

this big crowd, even saying as he does so, “I have compassion for the crowd.” It’s running all through these stories in this section of Matthew. Compassion, compassion, compassion.

In the encounter with the Canaanite woman, Jesus has to stretch this compassion to a place and to people that he thought he wasn’t ready for yet. He was focused on the people of Israel, his people, even though there are hints all through Matthew that Jesus’s ultimate act of compassion is for the whole world. The Gentiles in the genealogy, the wise men from the East, the sending out at the very end: Go and make disciples of all nations.

This Canaanite woman makes him stop and evaluate, reassess, refocus. She makes him stretch his compassion to include her and her daughter, to include people who are not Israelites. And he does. Without much fanfare, after their back and forth. Great is your faith, he tells her, and her daughter is healed.

She has heard who he is. She knows who he is. He’s the one with compassion, he’s the one who has healed and cast out demons and fed the people. She calls him to be who he is, to stretch his compassion to include even her.

I’ve not persuaded myself to like the story. But there’s certainly a message for us. If Jesus can be encouraged or pushed to stretch his compassion, then surely we need that stretching, too. Surely we need to stretch our compassion to include whoever we’d rather exclude. Surely we could listen to those people who are pushing us outside any artificial barriers we’ve constructed. Surely we can stretch our compassion so it can be wider and broader and deeper than it was yesterday.