

Sermon August 20, 2023
[Matthew 15:21-28]

Did Jesus Experience a Conversion?
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Grace to you and peace from God, the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ, Amen. Thank you for overcoming the many obstacles between your home and the church this morning. I realize, especially on a day like today, how tempting it is to do otherwise. The fact that you have decided for being in this place speaks volumes to *your* great faith, as we'll hear about in a moment when it comes to the Canaanite woman and hers.

Last week you heard a defense against the charge that Peter had a "weak faith," according to Jesus. Instead of chastising Peter, I argued, who got out of the boat and walked, however briefly, on the water, Jesus should have chastised the 11 *other* disciples who remained in the boat and refused to take a risk. *They* were the ones, I submitted, who had a weak faith. Peter, on the other hand, was willing to take a risk, knowing it could end in failure.

By way of conclusion, I was happy to discover that almost all of you agreed – a miracle at Queen Anne Lutheran Church – had it been for two or three people who abstained. Had this been a court of law, accordingly, Peter would have almost been vindicated of the charge, one that carried centuries, that his faith was weak.

But what about Jesus, as opposed to Peter? Saying he *should* have chastised the 11 other disciples who remained in the boat ought to give us pause. Why? Because it implies Jesus made an error of judgment. It implies that he made a mistake in observation. But how could Jesus commit an error of judgment, you might ask, if he was perfect? After all, was he not, as Hebrews 7 says, "Holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens"? Or again, now to cite the last chapter of John's Gospel, did he not "know all things," as Peter confesses? If so, how could Jesus make a mistake? How could Jesus commit an error of judgment? How could Jesus be wrong?

Now in a moment, I'm going to show you how we can affirm both that Jesus was without sin, yet also imperfect – hold that together: That Jesus was without sin, yet also imperfect. More importantly, I'm going to show you why it matters, or at least why it *should* matter, to each person in this room, as well as to those listening online.

But first, let's turn to the Gospel reading for today for an example, not only of how Jesus makes yet another error of judgment, but also, thanks to an unnamed Canaanite woman, experiences a change of heart – or more directly, what I call a conversion. "The Conversion of Jesus Christ." Are you ready for this?

Let's take a look at verses 21–28 of our Gospel reading for today. Jesus, we read, ventured to Tyre and Sidon, which is the north side of Palestine, on the border of what used to be called "the Land of Cana." This is why he encounters a Canaanite woman. She asks him "Son of David" – going back to Matthew's genealogy in the first chapter – to save her daughter who is tormented by a demon, which in the first century would have been to say something like perhaps she has a psychiatric illness. But he doesn't answer her, which seems uncharacteristically harsh in terms of Jesus. Remember, this was the same man who said his burden was light, that we should take it upon ourselves, that he is gentle.

Yet here, after she keeps shouting at the disciples, Jesus says, "Send her away." And then, more famously, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ("I am here to save the Jews.")

But she came in, kneels before him, and said, "Lord, help me." So here we have a kind of bold humility. She's not going to let go when her daughter's life and well-being is at stake.

He answers that "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." That's *really* harsh. But then – and this is a literary convention that's characteristic throughout the ancient world – the person in an inferior position, rebukes, or bests, or outdoes the teacher. She says, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters table." And Jesus, obviously surprised, exclaims, "Woman, great is your faith!"

Now this is the only time in the entire Gospel of Matthew that Jesus says of someone "their faith is great." The woman's request is made; her daughter is healed; and the kingdom has advanced once more.

Let's take a look just briefly at a few of the elements I've now covered. Tyre and Sidon: This is from the Women's Bible Commentary: "Unlike Mark's account," we read – so Mark was written before Matthew; Mark has an earlier version, a briefer version of the story – "Matthew, who retells the story, does not present Jesus entering Tyre and Sidon, rather the woman and Jesus meet on the border. He goes toward that district, and she comes out; so this is a border meeting. This is a meeting on the boundaries.

Mark identifies the woman as a Greek, a Syro-Phoenician by birth. In Matthew however, she is a Canaanite, nameless in the Gospel, as are most figures who need healing. Church tradition calls her Eusta. Her presence recalls the original struggle between the Hebrews and the indigenous population of the land, namely the Canaanites. By identifying her specifically as a Canaanite woman, moreover, Matthew

indicates that she is *doubly* marginal. A woman alone in a man's world, a Gentile and hence, unclean."

Nevertheless, as I indicated, she boldly implores Jesus, as probably any parent would, to heal or exorcise her child, to which the disciples say, "Send her away," which could mean "throw her out" or "loose her," which could mean, "just perform the dang exorcism, and let's get the heck out of here."

But Jesus hesitates, confirming the limits of his mission to the Israelites, or the house of Israel, and then harshly comparing her, and her people, as you read, to dogs. There you have it: The provincial, narrow-minded Jesus, in conversation with a woman who lives across the border, who represents the "other," who is, by Jesus and his fellow Israelite contemporaries, regarded as a dog.

But then, and this is the part I love in the story, and I think, a crucial turning point in the Gospel of Matthew, the woman surprises Jesus. *She surprises him*. "Yes, Lord," she says, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

The reply inspires Jesus to praise her by exclaiming, as I said, "She has great faith," which again, is the *only* time he says that of *anyone* in the entire Gospel narrative.

Now, you've heard the charge: Jesus is surprised. His view of his mission is provincial, limited, narrow-minded. He makes an error of judgment, not only regarding the 11 disciples, as we heard about last week, but in this case regarding the Canaanites, and this woman in particular. That's scandalous! It's scandalous for me to stand in a pulpit and say that *Jesus was wrong*. In fact, as I was told by another pastor, at *her* church, this wouldn't fly. "I could say that Jesus had 'a bad moment,'" she tells me, "but I could *not* say, as you're going to do, that he was wrong." (To which I replied, "I am the pastor of a congregation of mavericks. They can take anything!")

Now, there are lots of attempts to sugarcoat or soften Jesus's response, to protect him in the story from looking mean-spirited, cold-hearted, uncharitable or simply wrong. Some claim that when Jesus said it wasn't fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs, he didn't really mean "dogs." He meant "puppies" or "household dogs."

Some argue that he was speaking in jest. As if calling a woman and her people "dogs" was somehow funny. One commentary indicates that "for many here, Jesus said what he said 'with a smile on his face.'" Still others say that he was actually testing the woman's faith; that *he knew all along* his mission included the Jews as well as the Gentiles!

All these interpretations, however, are clearly forced, and they reflect, each of them, an ulterior motive: namely, *to protect Jesus from appearing to be human*, insofar as he committed, again, an error of judgment, by restricting his mission to Israel, and then, after being outdone by a nameless woman, having a change of heart.

We can't *have* that Jesus. We can't *have* the Jesus who learns. We can't *have* the Jesus who is corrected. We can't *have* the Jesus who was wrong. We can't *have* the Jesus who changed his mind.

Now, the scandal of Jesus's full humanity is nothing new. As Biblical scholars point out, this was the first heresy of the Christian church, namely, to deny his full humanity. Indeed, in the first epistle of John chapter 4, the author reserves the name "Antichrist" for anyone who denies that Jesus came in the flesh, that is to say, that he was truly, and really human.

Maybe, I think, in view of this heresy, it's easier to believe in a Christ who looks down from heaven, and promises to solve our problems, than the one who merely joins us, and sides with us in facing them. Maybe people deny Jesus's humanity because we want a Jesus who has all the answers, rather than a human being who acknowledges his own limitations, when it comes to his knowledge, particularly with regard to the future. In Mark 13:32 for example, Jesus says that "no one knows when the end of the age will come. Nobody but the Father." That implies or indicates that Jesus's knowledge of the future was limited. Sure, he had a sense, an intuition, that for preaching what he did and doing what he did, he would pay the price with his life. But, again, he acknowledges his own limitation, according to Mark and Matthew.

A Jesus who has all the answers, moreover, doesn't match up with a Jesus who learns and grows, according to Luke, talking about his childhood, and the Letter to the Hebrews.

Maybe people deny his humanity because we are afraid of doubt, or see it as an imperfection. One of our members told me this last week that she could no longer come to church because she "doubted too much." She was too afraid to admit that doubt is okay. Are we afraid to doubt? Why should we be, if Jesus himself exhibits it, when he cries out to the Father from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Or maybe we deny Jesus's humanity because we think Jesus's fallibility would cast doubt on *everything* he said. Even though the Letter to the Hebrews tells us that he was "like us in every way, except when it comes to sin." I want you to cling to those words: "like us in every way, except without sin."

Whatever the reason for why people deny Jesus's humanity, my point is simple. To believe in the Incarnation is to accept that God in Christ took upon Godself *all* the limitations that come with being human, including susceptibility to errors of judgment.

But Jesus, I suggest, is not the Christ because he knew everything. Jesus is the Christ *because of his unbroken relationship with God*, which brings us back to our Gospel reading for today. In the encounter Jesus has with the Canaanite woman, his response *confirms* the limits he took upon himself as a consequence of the Incarnation. How? Because *she* teaches *him* a lesson! She reveals to him his provincial way of thinking about his mission. It doesn't end with the Jews or the house of Israel, he says, it *begins* with them! After them it extends to their neighbors, the Canaanites to the north. After the Canaanites, it goes out to all nations, as Jesus will say at the end of Matthew's Gospel, chapter 28. This is why we affirm in today's Sending Hymn "In Christ, there is No East or West," God has embraced, not just the house of Israel, but the *whole world in Christ Jesus*, not just one part of it, or one people.

Now, the Apostle Paul knew this well. "The mercy of God," he says in Romans 11, our Second Reading for today, "extends to everyone." And I'm indebted to an attendee of the congregation who gave me a book pointing this out. Paul writes, as you heard, "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience, so that God may be merciful to all." Paul ends with a hope in universal salvation, which is to say, "all will be saved."

There's nothing unchristian about hoping for that. Indeed, 1 Timothy 4 says, "We hope for the salvation of all people." And Paul proclaims it here. "God has imprisoned all in disobedience, so that God may be merciful to all."

Now, imagine if Jesus had *not* encountered the nameless woman in our Gospel reading for today – a woman who converted him, if you will, to a larger vision of his mission and ministry. What if by not encountering her, the love he embodied never crossed Israel's borders? Again: What if by not encountering her, the love he embodied never crossed Israel's borders? Where would that leave us?

That's the first thing I take away from today's story. By challenging Jesus, a woman from Cana reveals to him and to us, again to cite the title of a hymn, "The Wideness – or the inclusiveness, the RIC-ness – of God's Mercy." God's love crosses borders.

The second thing I take about today's story is how it makes Jesus personal to us. Our Messiah is not up there in heaven. He does not reside far and away with God, only to look down on our suffering without doing anything. Instead, he joins us in it, taking upon himself all the limitations that come with being human. He learns. He grows. He

doubts. He dies. And all this is good news, insofar as we have a God in Christ who identifies with us, and who promises never to leave or forsake us.

This last week, I did a Commendation of the Dying for a person some of you may know, Janet Bush. And one of the things that I said, as I always say in those moments to the family, is that God isn't up there somewhere, looking down upon us, doing nothing. God, in Christ, is weeping with us here in the room.

That, to me, reflects the full consequence of God becoming human in Jesus Christ. May Jesus's humanity speak to us.

May it empower us.

May it save us.

And all God's people said, Amen.