

Proper 15 (A)
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Matthew 15:21-28¹
TLC, Keene, NH

Face to Face with Love

Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Introduction

*“I’ve always believed in numbers ... equations and logics that lead to reason, but after a lifetime of such pursuits, I ask what truly **is** logic? Who decides reason?”* So queried John Nash, the Nobel Prize winner for Economics in 1994. It was Nash, suffering from Schizophrenia, who was featured in the Academy Award winning movie *A Beautiful Mind*. As he relates, his life’s journey could be traced *“through the physical, the metaphysical, the delusional and back.”* Wherein, *“the most important discovery of my career ... of my life,”* he said, *“is only in the mysterious equations of love, that any logical reason can be found ...”*

Such a truth may be seen in our text for this morning ... where in the face of all that was logical, or reasonable, a woman in need comes face to face with love ... love that defies the norm, love that flies in the face of convention, love that is extravagant, and does not count the cost. It is the love of a woman for her Savior ... but in the final “analysis” more the love of a *Savior* for this woman, the love of a Savior for all.

¹ Revised and edited from 2002.

Let us rejoice in such a love. What is more, let us rejoice in the invitation that this love offers – to come to the Lord’s house, to sit at the Master’s table, and to receive Bread enough for all ... for life! *“It is only in the mysterious equations of love that any logical reason can be found.”* In Christ, we find both the reason and the gift. And as a result, with the woman, we live! *Amen.*

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It seems a strange journey ... begging the question why Jesus would take it in the first place. Yes, why walk the 100 miles or so into a strange and foreign territory? It seems a little baffling ... almost unnecessary ... were it not for all the recent events that had taken place in Jesus’ life: the death of His cousin John, the mob attempt – following the feeding of the 5000 – to make Jesus a kind of earthly king over Israel. Then, there is the growing opposition of the Pharisees, that “truth squad” of the day – gunning for Him as they sought to silence the sympathy of God.

However, we interpret Jesus’ going north, His journey into the unclean territory of Tyre and Sidon is the only recorded trip there in the Gospels ... a trip whose sole purpose seems to center one particular woman ... with no thought given to herself, but only for God’s mercy to fall on another.

She comes with a need – perhaps, not unlike us this morning ... as beggars, where something in Jesus always seems to evoke the idea that He is someone who might help.

She comes with a prayer, rising from the depths of her own compassion.² As if Jesus came walking into town with a sign around His neck saying: **“Free Gift Today – God’s Love!”**

Where, what greater purpose does the Savior need, that would cause Him to go out of His way? Yes, Jesus needs no further reason, or *logic*, to cross the universe, to show the Father’s heart ... to demonstrate that just a “crumb” from his table is enough!

Did He not do that when He left His throne to walk as we walked, to cry, hunger and thirst as we ... to know death as we know it? When you consider the territory, says David McKenna, you consider the “space,” what else could it be about? [*Mark*, 157]

Like having friends re-enter your life, or you theirs, after a prolonged time apart. Where, like McKenna, I am oft-reminded that, living in, or visiting various regions of the nation, you do make “unscientific” observations about the nature of people.

For example, in New England, we are [like the stones that make up much of this area] a hardy, self-sufficient people. Where in, going to the opposite corner of the nation, the heat and sand of the South tend to nurture a people who are a little more laid back, where life is slower, more relaxed – who love their BBQ, sweet tea and AC.

² “Her address soars up to heaven; her request goes down to hell ... in one great cry the woman has pitted the Davidide against the demons.” [Bruner, *Matthew*, 2:551]

Or the Midwest, where people huddle together in small towns, and community is forged by numerous face-to-face encounters, of people living close together. Then there is the West – those California types who ... well, you know how *they* are! [If you are listening from there, I'm kidding. I said it was “unscientific”☺.]

But while the nature and space around us might make a difference, notes McKenna, and the place we choose to live might speak volumes, Jesus demonstrates that when it comes to His love, these things make *no* difference. For God is *no* respecter of persons, that the Good News of His forgiveness and life is for all people. [157] Where harkening back to our opening illustration, it seems that on the surface, “there is a natural, logical kind of loving that loves lovely things and lovely people. ... But there is another kind of love that doesn't look for value in what it loves, but that [actually] ‘creates’ value in what it loves.” [Pitt-Watson, *Primer for Preachers*] Just as Jesus loved this woman ... just as He loves you. The Apostle John puts it this way:

“He came to that which was His own, but His own received Him not. Yet to all who received Him, to those who believe on His name, He gave the right to become the children of God.”

Are there not moments in our lives when all we can do is cling to that love for dear life – as sure as the Savior clings to us? It's exactly what the woman in our text does – though it seems at first it was a little slow in coming. I mean, imagine having your request outright ignored by the Son of God.

²² **And behold, a Canaanite woman** *from that region came out and was crying* [continuously], **“Have mercy on me** [as her daughter’s misery had become her own], **O Lord, Son of David;** *my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.*” ²³ **But he did not answer her a word.**

First, note what Jesus does *not* do! He doesn’t say “no”! And any day that God doesn’t outright say “no” to what troubles us is a good day. The hymn writer William Cowper says in his hymn “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” ...

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning Providence He hides a smiling face.”* ³

Here, Jesus doesn’t say “No.” Nor is He swayed by His disciple’s *unloving* attitude to simply send the woman away. Wherein, it’s all too easy at times, isn’t it, to shelve the love we’re shown, and to dismiss those we don’t think deserve it – or those we think are too far removed from it. [It still baffles me how folks say they love you, but then so quickly give up on you ... a whole lifetime of memories, gone ... for what you don’t even know what you did?]⁴

But Jesus doesn’t say “no”. And He doesn’t send her away.

Two for two!

³ “One of the greatest destroyers of faith is timing that doesn’t fit our pre-conceived notions. We live in a fast-paced world where we have come to expect instant responses to every desire and need. Instant coffee. Instant potatoes. Instant cash. ... Instant relief for sore muscles and minor back-ache. It’s almost our birthright to make the world jump at our demands. But God doesn’t operate that way. He is never in a hurry. And sometimes, He can be agonizingly slow in solving the problems we bring to his attention.” [Dobson, *When God Doesn’t Make Sense*]

⁴ Note: the disciples are so quick to dismiss the woman they “don’t even offer the word “Lord.” But the woman’s faith is not in the disciples, nor in their lack of desire to help. Rather ... It is [in] Jesus.” [Bruner, 552]

But where, what follows, is one of those sayings of Jesus ... one that, if we didn't know better, has Jesus sounding no more loving than His disciples. Where, at least if you never get to 2nd base, you never have to endure being thrown out on what you thought was a double.

²⁴ [Jesus] answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."... "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

What kind of love is this? Wherein, we are left to ponder this "mysterious love" that at times tests faith ... at times tests silence ... at time tests doubt. Where we might ask, "Why not simply give up at this point? Why *not* simply go away?" What did this woman sense in Jesus that kept her coming back – even after the apparent rejection. "Was her need [just] too great ... for her to simply give up?" [*Sermon Studies on the Gospels (A)*]

Is not our need – at times ... whatever we may bring to the Lord's house on any given Sunday? Leading us right back to the *only* place where that need finds its rest? Where in the midst of our unworthiness to receive anything from the Lord, we are once again, face-to-face with compassion and an invitation:

FIRST, to be invited *into* the house. "*Come to me all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.*" Come to me all, who by reason of their sin, guilt or shame ... their grief, suffering or pain, need a place to rest their heads. Come, be refreshed and strengthened in *my* promises.

Or in the SECOND place, to take a place at the Master's Table.

"But I am a dog," you say. "My sin is great! I am beaten! I am confused, I don't know whether I should even be here at all!"

So be it. You *are* a dog, as am I ... Gentiles ... late comers to the vineyard – are we all! But, admittedly, a dog's life can be pretty good. [Ask Gracie. Ask Sally. Ask Newman. Ask Marzipan.] And this woman's life *is* good, because in His love, Jesus has taken notice of her. He has not sent her away. He doesn't say "No." Nor to us! But invites us in, giving us a place at His Table.

And if that were not enough – in the house and at the table – we come [THIRDLY] to be fed with the very Bread of Life ... by His Word ... His Body and His Blood. So "that when we come weary with travel, weak and hungry in our souls, discouraged and wounded because of our false steps, stumbling, and falling, we enter and are refreshed" with the very Bread of peace.

[Adapted from Rosenius, *On the Eucharist*]

And all at Jesus' gracious invitation ... to house, to Table, to Bread. Where dogs are no longer dogs, but one of the family! Where all are welcome. Where there are no outcasts here, as – once and for all – we're saved by love!

Conclusion

On a commuter flight from Portland, Maine to Boston, Henry Dempsey, heard an unusual noise in the rear of the small aircraft. So he turned the controls over to his co-pilot and went back to check it out.

As he reached the tail section, the plane hit an air pocket, and Dempsey was tossed against the rear door, where all too quickly he discovered the mysterious noise. The door had not been properly latched prior to takeoff, and now it flew open, and he himself was sucked out of the jet. The co-pilot, seeing the red indicator light for an open door, immediately radioed the nearest airport, requesting permission to make an emergency landing. He reported that the pilot had fallen out of the plane.

Miraculously, after the plane landed, they found Henry Dempsey – holding onto the outdoor ladder of the aircraft. Somehow he had caught it, held on for ten minutes or so until the plane landed. It took airport rescue several minutes to pry Dempsey’s fingers from the ladder of the plane.

Beloved of the Lord, such is the nature of the promise that Christ has given us to hold onto – as sure as the woman persevered in her faith, under the most extreme conditions. Such is the nature of the love of Christ that, even now, holds on to you for dear life.⁵

“It is only in the mysterious equations of love that any logical reason can be found,” Nash said at the Stockholm podium. But it isn’t really all that mysterious. And it’s not at all illogical. Jesus loves you. Jesus loves me. Jesus loves us ... all! *Amen.*

⁵ “The woman had won the strength which Jacob won by his night-long struggle with the angel.” [Trench, *Miracles of Jesus*]