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"Upside Down Mercy"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
On March 19th, 2023, from Matthew 15:21-28*

Seven years ago, in the Spring of 2015, I was contacted by the search committee for position of Senior Minister at Myers Park Baptist Church. I wasn't sure I was ready to leave the church I was serving at the time, but I thought "What could it hurt?" In first stage of the process the committee asked each candidate to fill out a questionnaire. This is a common practice in clergy search processes, but this questionnaire was different from others I'd seen. It was way more intense—harder than most of my final exam in graduate school and doctoral studies. The questionnaire had twelve incredibly intimidating short answer questions and it took me twenty hours to complete.

And I will never forget the first question, the most intimidating of all was "Exegete Matthew 15:21-28." That's all it said! #1 Exegete Matthew 15:21-28, which meant they wanted me to interpret this story where Jesus called a woman a dog! Really?! Not "Can you describe your call to ministry?" or "Share your leadership philosophy?" or "Who is God?" but explain the most controversial and confounding picture of Jesus, where he insults a woman who asked him to heal her daughter. That is your first question? That's your "ice breaker?" To be honest, I thought was a joke—then I thought it was a trap. Why would a search committee choose this as the first question? Welcome to Myers Park Baptist Church.

Perhaps the reason they chose this story is because our community has always embraced the radical humanity of Jesus and there is no other story in the gospels that reveals Jesus' humanity and finitude more vividly. It's also one of the few stories that appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but Matthew's version took what appeared originally in Mark and made it worse by changing the ethnicity of the woman in the story from "Syrophenician" to "Canaanite." Phoenician is a word for people from the region of Tyre and Sidon—two important port cities on the Mediterranean Sea; now located in modern day Lebanon. Canaan was the name of a much larger region where a whole host of tribes originated: Amorites, Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites, Hittites, Jebusites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amalakites, stalactites and stalagmites. Ok, I threw those last two in to see if you were paying attention, but all the other groups were technically Canaanites, including the Israelites who were also from Canaan!



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Yet, no Phoenician in the first century called themselves Canaanite. The name “Canaanite” was an old, inflammatory term of derogation people used to distinguish and elevate themselves above others from that same region. The Israelites saw themselves as the only rightful inhabitants of land, and used the term Canaanite for the people who did not fit into their approved tribal and religious framework. It was bad enough to be considered a Gentile, but to label someone “Canaanite” was to evoke a painful history of conflict between Jews and Phoenicians. To make matters worse, it defined this woman—this mother—in terms of an age-old prejudice and bigotry that a first-century Jewish audience would quickly understand. It would be like calling someone a “Barbarian,” today which started out as a term for anyone who didn’t speak Greek, but now means uncivilized, violent, and less than human.

Canaanites were the prototypical “other;” a faceless enemy to be disregarded and dispatched without mercy at every opportunity—and yet mercy is exactly what this Canaanite mother came out searching and shouting at Jesus for—mercy for her daughter who was tormented by a demon. “Lord, have mercy on me” she cried out, and these five words have echoed throughout Christian history as one of the most powerful and vulnerable prayers. *Kyrie Eleison*, “Lord, have mercy” has been prayed and sung in Christian liturgies for at least 1500 years and probably longer. The phrase appears five times in the Psalms, two times in Luke, and three times in the gospel of Matthew, but Matthew 15 is the only time these words are spoken by a woman—the only time it appears as a heart wrenching plea from a woman to a man named Jesus.

I find it deeply troubling that we Christians have been singing and praying for mercy for thousands of years, and yet overall, as a people, we have not shown much mercy to each other or the rest of the world. The very thing we have asked God for the most; the very thing we have prayed for the most, the very thing that we have sung for the most in our history, is the very thing that we have offered one another and to the world the least. We’ve been praying, “God, have mercy on us” while at the same time being merciless to our neighbor. We’ve been singing “God have mercy on us” while at the same time saying, “There will be no mercy” to our fellow human beings. We’ve shown little mercy to Jews, Muslims, or indigenous peoples across the globe. We’ve shown little mercy to atheists, agnostics, and Christians who do not believe the same way we do. We’ve shown little mercy to poor, sick, or disabled people. We’ve shown little mercy to African, Asian, Caribbean, or Latinx people. We’ve shown little mercy to LGBTQ people. We’ve shown little mercy to women.



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Everyone needs mercy. Our world needs mercy. Jesus said, "Go learn what this means, I desire mercy not sacrifice." Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy." Yet in this story Jesus refused to show mercy over and over until he was bested by the woman, which is why I see both the horror and promise of Christianity in this text. Three times in a row, Jesus rejected this woman's cries for mercy. Remember how quickly he responded when Jairus, the leader of the synagogue, was pleading for his daughter's life? Jesus immediately he responded with urgency. Here, in this story, Jesus ignores the woman and does not answer her "at all." Then, when his disciples complain about her continued shouting, Jesus agrees with them responding, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." When the woman gets down on her knees and begs him for help, Jesus answers, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Just like that, Jesus ignored her, excluded her, and insulted her—"bam, bam, bam!"

This text is a stunning revelation that even Jesus was trapped in the patriarchy of his day. He wasn't immune to the that ideology. He was human. But the question is, "What are we supposed to do with a calloused and cold-hearted Christ who was at first unwilling to offer mercy to this Canaanite woman?" I believe we should tremble with humility as we face radical humanity of his failure. Whether Jesus was aware of his actions or not, regardless of his intentions, the fact that even Jesus ignored, excluded, and insulted someone in his life should be a stunning reminder that all of us are capable of the same. "There but by the grace of God go I." But there is also grace and hope in a human Jesus. We learn nothing from success. Failure is our best teacher, and in every gospel, Jesus only expands his mission to the Gentiles after this lesson from Justa the Canaanite woman. She was the catalyst for Jesus' growing inclusivity and his increasing ability to draw the circle of God's love wider. The question for those of us in power is: Are we willing to reckon with the ways we ignore, exclude, and insult others? Are we willing to listen, repent, turn, and change our ways? Are we willing to give mercy to others, or will we double down?

The prophet Amos has a refrain he repeats over and over about the lack of mercy he sees among the people. He proclaims, "for three transgressions and for four...for three transgressions and for four." Three was limit on sin the law allowed before God's judgment—three represents fullness and completeness. Four was too much, too far, over the line, which means Jesus was right at the tipping point in this story. After three transgressions he stopped. But the craziest thing about this story is that Jesus was not only ignoring, excluding, and insulting this mother, but his own mothers, his own family, and his own heritage. Did you know of the five women who appear in Jesus' family tree in genealogy in the gospel of Matthew, three of them were Canaanites—Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. When we dehumanize others, we dehumanize ourselves, and our re-humanization requires a reckoning, repentance, and repair.



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When the Canaanite woman cunningly said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table,' Jesus suddenly realized he has missed the mark. He answered her, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly. But this story is not about Jesus. It is not about another man in a long line of men who ignored, excluded, and insulted a woman. It is not about another male religious leader who tried to turn away a woman need. It is not about a group of men who are tired of listening to a woman either. This story is about the Canaanite woman. A Christian sermon from the third century, named the Canaanite woman "Justa" and her daughter "Bernice." Justa will get mercy in this story. Justa will get justice in this story. Justa will get healing in this story. Justa will get liberation in this story, but not until she cries out for it to Jesus and his male disciples four different times—it took four times for them to finally hear her.

For hundreds of years Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 14, "Women should keep silent in the churches" has been used to silence, suppress, and subjugate women in Christian communities. It's the quintessential example of theological malpractice and biblical abuse. Yet it continues to rear its ugly head today. I'll never forget having a conversation with my mom about this text at the dinner table when I was eighteen. My mother is an ardent second wave feminist who hyphenated her last name when she got married and took a lot of flak from her family. When she first met my father on a trip to NY, she made him read *The Feminist Mystique* as a test to determine if he was worthy of dating. My mother was not only the first woman in her family to go to college, but the first to get a doctorate degree. She is brilliant world-renowned scholar and was serving as the head of the Dept. of Education at UNC Charlotte when her eighteen-year-old son (that's me) came home after one day of reading theology at the local Christian bookstore and brazenly proclaimed to her that the Bible said women were to be silent and submit to their husbands. The look on her face was so fierce, her tone of voice so sharp it peeled the paint off the wall. Needless to say, it was a brief conversation, she corrected my theology, and I was lucky to get out alive.

The story of Justa in Matthew 15 overturns Paul's misguided advice to women. Silence would have done nothing for the Canaanite woman. Silence would have done nothing for Justa and her daughter. Justa not only had to speak, she had to shout to be heard in a man's world, and she had to keep on shouting when she was told to be silent. She had to keep on crying out even when she was told to go away. Then she had to literally put her body in the way to be seen, falling on her knees in front of Jesus, begging him to help her, and that still wasn't enough to overcome his prejudice and bigotry. Speaking out wasn't enough, shouting wasn't enough, crying wasn't enough, falling on her knees wasn't enough, and begging wasn't enough. And that's the deepest injustice of this story. It should have been enough.



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Women shouldn't have to shout, or cry, or fall on her knees, or beg to get mercy. They shouldn't have had to fight through the disciples' and desperately throw her body on the ground to get mercy. Her first request should have been enough for everyone—for Jesus and his disciples—it should be enough for all of us. Mercy should be freely given by Jesus and his followers, and it should be freely given by all us today.

What did this mother have to do to find the mercy and get help for her daughter? What did she have to do to cut through the disciples' dismissal and get Jesus' attention? What did she have to do to overturn the patriarchy in this story? Justa had to turn the tables on Jesus—she had to talk back. Jesus said, "it's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," and Justa replied, "yes, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters table." She shouldn't have had to talk back to Jesus, but he wasn't listening, he was being obstinate and thickheaded, so she flipped the script on him, gave Jesus a comeback, and turn his own words against him.

When I was a child my father said, "Don't you talk back to me." "Yakety Yak," the song says, "don't talk back!" If I heard that as a boy, then I know little girls, young women, and even adult women hear that kind of thing all the time. But Justa's faith turns that's saying on its head. Justa shows us that when people try to ignore you, when people try to silence you, when people try to send you away, when people try to exclude you, when people try to insult you—sometimes you must talk back. To get what you need you may have to talk back. A lot of commentators want to make this story about persistence, resilience, fortitude, and determination of the woman, and but let's be specific about what that looks like in the real world. It sounds like a man in political office describing one of his female colleagues saying, "Nevertheless She Persisted." It looks like a judge, who is a woman, saying, "I dissent." It looks like people in need of mercy, and their allies and accomplices, speaking up, or shouting out, or crying loudly, or putting their bodies on the line, begging for mercy, turning the tables and talking back to the patriarchy until it is overturned into a beloved community of equality for all people.

Whenever we read the Bible, we always want to see ourselves as Jesus, but if you're a person in power like me—then this is the only text where we can see ourselves in Jesus. If you find yourself, like I do, identifying with Jesus in this story then let his first three reactions to the Canaanite woman be our warning and let his final response be our guide. Let us refrain from ignoring, excluding, or insulting people before we seek to understand them and their perspective.



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Let us listen carefully and deeply, soften our hearts, and open ourselves up to challenge, to the idea that we might be wrong, to fraternal or maternal correction. Let us praise the courageous faith of those who are willing to speak up, shout, cry out, get on our knees, and beg for the mercy they need the very first time they ask us and not the fourth time around. Let us be eager to respond and not wait to praise people only when they've finally become so desperate for mercy, they have to talk back to us and turn the tables. Let us be eager to offer mercy and meet the needs of those struggling to care for themselves and their children. That's the lesson we should take from Jesus.

And if you find yourself, as I imagine many women do today, identifying with the story of Justa and her daughter Beatrice, then never forget these words by the great civil rights activist, legal scholar, and Episcopal priest Pauli Murray. "Hope is a crushed stalk between clenched fingers. Hope is a bird's wing broken by a stone. Hope is a word in a tuneless ditty—a word whispered with the wind, a dream of forty acres and a mule, a cabin of one's own and a moment to rest, a name and a place for one's children and children's children at last...hope is a song in a weary throat."

Hope is a song in a weary throat. Hope is a song in the weary throat of a mother desperately searching for mercy for her daughter in a merciless world. Hope is a word in a throat speaking, shouting, crying out, begging, and talking back to the patriarchy. Don't give up hope. Don't ever give up the quest for mercy. Keep crying out in hope from a weary throat. As Micah said, we are required to, "Do justice, love mercy, and keep on walking humbly with God." Remember that your needs are real, and your needs are valid. So, declare what you need. Be insistent. Don't be ignored. Take up space. Talk back and turn over the tables. Don't ever stop speaking, shouting, crying out, begging, or talking back until you get what you need, and until we all succeed in dismantling the patriarchy. Talk back and turn over the tables until there are no more tables to turn. This is what it means to have a faith like Justa, a faith that Jesus had no choice but to call "great"—a faith that expanded even Jesus' vision of inclusivity and forced everyone to draw the circle wider. Hold on to that faith, move with that faith, speak with that faith, shout with that faith, cry out with that faith, live with that faith because that is the kind of faith that has the power to turn the world upside down and into the kingdom of God.