

Church Blueprints

Matthew 15:21-28

Rev. Brett Shoemaker ~ August 27, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that moment. (Matthew 15:21-28, NRSV)

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When I was a kid, I loved hide and seek. Something about finding that perfect spot. Trying to read someone's mind finding the least likely spot, wondering, "Can I fit inside that clothes dryer? Is that even a good idea?"

Most people grow out of hide and seek, but I still love trying to find places that people wouldn't expect. In my mid-twenties, working at a summer camp, I think I hit the height of my love for hide and seek. One of the camp games was something called the "Counselor Hunt" where all of the counselors and many of the staff were assigned different point values and went out to hide. The kids would then be turned loose all over camp to find them, collect their points, and in the end, got to throw each of them into the lake.

The game begins at the campfire. As it turns out, just that week, a large truck had delivered sawdust next to the campfire area to spread around and make it look beautiful. So there it was, just begging for someone to carve out a little hole, climb inside, and be buried by a friend. What made it extra sweet, or so I thought, was that it was right next to the starting and ending spot, so someone would be able to hear all of the excitement of the game – who was found, strategies of the kids – all the while being literally right under their noses.

Now, in my brilliance, or in my defense of a poor decision, I don't know, I realized in advance that it might be hard to breathe in there, so I found a scrap piece of PVC pipe, took it with me into the pile with just the end sticking out, and had my best friend cover me up completely with the sawdust with a shovel.

A couple things to remember about sawdust. One, it's not as clean as it looks. It's dusty. And difficult to breathe even with assistance. Two, I underestimated the

temperature that would quickly rise once I was in there. Three, being forced to remain still for 45 minutes or longer, well, I hadn't counted on the pains that would develop in all kinds of places.

Ah, and one final thing I hadn't figured on: Kids love to climb on piles of anything.

One 5th grade girl was not into running around camp. She preferred hanging out with the other leaders watching kids come and go, keeping score. And, she loved this sawdust pile. So early on, she climbed right up on top. I could feel it but it wasn't so bad. But things began to shift as she turned it into a slide and a trampoline. Shortly after, she discovered just the end of a pvc pipe sticking out from the bottom, and pulled it out like she'd discovered treasure.

From somewhere underneath, I was gasping, aching, sweating, and generally regretting my decision. But it was a great spot. And a short time later, my hair, that was much longer...and darker...then began to show through...apparently. Because I felt her pause somewhere above me. Wondering what this random shock of moss or something was, she tried to pick it up...with some force when it didn't come up right away.

And, oh, the scream heard across the camp when she pulled a human up from the pile, first of surprise, then of joy for finding a counselor without ever leaving home base. She was her team's hero! And I was glad that it was over.

There comes a point in every game of hide and seek, out of boredom, fear, or pain, that you no longer want to remain hidden. When you are never found, no one really wins the game.

It's a funny story now. I don't want to downplay, though, the fact that so many people around us are tormented every day, even right now, with great pain: physical, mental, emotional, social pain. Pain from loss, worry, threat, shattered dreams. One of the most difficult questions most of us will have for God is why the magnitude and depth of pain has to be a part of our human existence. I'm pretty sure if we haven't answered it by now as the human race, we never will. But one thing I've found to be true. God can use pain - for ourselves or others - to draw us toward Jesus.

I choose not to believe that God causes or wills our pain. God's compassion motivates him toward a deeper love for us. God weeps along with us. But I do believe God uses our pain and discomfort to get our attention. Pain makes us want to be found.

So often, I go through my days, my weeks, looking for places of peace and comfort, retreat and silence, and assume this is where I will discover a connection with God. I look at my pain and think, "Well, that must be from something I did wrong or something God needs to fix." Then I set off to fix it...myself. I forget that God meets us in those places precisely to draw us closer.

C. S. Lewis writes, "Pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world."¹

Finding this quote again led me to the story of Daniel Ritchie. His story begins with this sentence: I was born without arms.²

But Daniel says this: "I have never been able to hide. Many people can bury their pain, but my heartache is written all over my two empty sleeves. Those sleeves tell a story without my mouth ever saying a word. My pain almost swallowed me. I used to think that being born without arms was the most horrible thing that could happen to a person. In Christ, he has helped me say that the worst and most painful thing that has ever happened to me is also the best thing that has ever happened to me."

It's fair to say, most of us, when we're in great pain, we avoid church. We stay home when we're hurting, when we're embarrassed, when we're sad, when we're having a bad hair day. Coming to church, we often think, is to celebrate God's goodness and to worship with joy. We forget that most of the people that Jesus met that

experienced transformation in the gospel story were hurting people.

This is certainly true of the woman in our story today. We never learn her name, unfortunately. Perhaps because there were a thousand others like her, and she represents anyone willing to reach out in desperation (and faith), and even challenge, someone that has the real power to heal.

In a few weeks, Jeff is going to introduce us to a series called "Building the Church." Even though this passage today came out of the lectionary, I think it has some important things to teach us of what the church should be about - by "church" I mean any gathering of followers of Jesus, but I'm especially wanting to think about our specific church - Faith - as well. Now, somewhere in a special place are blueprints for the church. I remember seeing these at one point, because when I arrived the entire courtyard, all the way out to the street, was dirt. Nothing had yet been built on this side of the building. I remember so many dedicated people pouring over these rolled out plans to make sure everything we had planned for the building to be would happen on schedule. But aside from the building, what we build, decisions we make, are dictated by the values we hold about what "church" should mean.

One of the questions I have for you is this: When you think of Faith Church, what characteristics would you say are built into the "blueprints"? This story highlights some of those values that should guide anyone before they begin any building. Now, there are probably many things we can learn from the passage, it's profound in so many ways, but I want to focus on two that work together here. One is a question about the first brick that's placed on the foundation, and one is a question about the doors. I'll give some hints as we talk through this.

Have you heard the parable of the three bricklayers? Lots of variations of the story, but essentially, it centers around the building of St. Paul's Cathedral in London in the 17th century. The world-famous architect, Christopher Wren, commissioned to oversee the rebuilding, observed three men working on the brickwork of the building. When asked, the first man said, "I'm a bricklayer working hard to feed my family." The second said, "I'm a builder. I'm building a wall." The third had a gleam in his eye when asked, and said, "I'm a cathedral builder. I'm building a great cathedral to the Almighty."

¹ Lewis, C. S., *The Problem of Pain*

² <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/god-shouts-to-us-in-our-pain>

So many places this could lead us, but this much is true: Worship on a Sunday morning, life groups during the week, children's programs - all of it - is part of building the church.

We don't just "go" to church. One way or another we have a contributing role in saying to our community, "Look! This is a place where you can bring your pain or your questions, where we can lift up our hearts in trust, fall on our knees in confession, and get some answers as we wrestle through these things together." We're building who we are for each other and or the world.

The location of our story is critical. Our story begins: Jesus left that place... We're joining the middle of Jesus' story. Previously on a Man from Nazareth... Jesus is having deep theological discussions that only Jewish people would be interested in well within the borders of Israel. He's talking to Pharisees who always have questions for him, he's talking to his disciples. Then he left that place for Tyre and Sidon - the land of Canaan, where a Canaanite woman meets him. Now, if Matthew was writing fiction, he could not have picked a place that better symbolized a more "foreign" place. This was a gentile region. The adjective "Canaanite" would have been like code language to the Hebrew people that meant "everything dangerous to the faith of Israel." It was a place filled idolatry and political threat and a people deemed unclean because of their practices in so many ways. In the Old Testament, God had to kick them out to prepare a land for the Israelites after they wandered through the desert. And they were warned not to get caught up in their lifestyle.

And Jesus was not just hanging around on the border. He was definitely well within it. What is Jesus doing here? I'm sure his disciples wanted to know as well. Most scholars agree that the point of his going was more in line with what we might think of as a "retreat" - to get away from all the questions and the controversy he was stirring up. His going is less like Jonah's trip to Nineveh in which he was told by God to go with a special message. Did Jesus know he was going to meet this woman, or that they would have this challenging conversation? There is strong evidence that suggests he did not. She surprised him with her request and now put him on the spot. The disciples wanted to send her away, but it left Jesus in a place of figuring out what he was going to do about her.

If you remember the story of the woman at the well, Jesus went out of his way to go into Samaria, and meet the woman there at Jacob's well.³ That was intentional. He met her on purpose to reach out to the Samaritans.

But the conversation we have today is so awkward, we'd have to say that Jesus was definitely surprised by her, and even more by her boldness of response. This woman seems to be the only person in the whole of the gospel story that got the best of Jesus in an argument. So many wise people tried and failed, but in this case, she responds in a way that gives her a chance. It was the ultimate "touché" moment. She doesn't give up! She took three things that seemed to be working in her favor: 1. Jesus doesn't send her away as the disciples wanted; 2. Jesus gives her silence, which is better than a "No", and 3. Jesus uses a different form of the word "dogs".

Wait. What?

In the Greek there are two different terms for dogs. Kuon is one word meaning stray dog or street dog, which would have been the usual derogatory term that a Jewish person might use to describe the Gentiles, and did. But Jesus uses the diminutive term kunarion which refers to smaller dogs often associated with house pets for the few that had them. You get a whole different picture of a dog, don't you? Interesting that Jesus had a choice. No surprise that the woman caught what might have been a wink from Jesus saying, "Do you see where I'm going with this?"⁴

The Canaanite people were thought to be irreversibly outside of the promises of God for God's people. No way. No how. But Jesus and this woman engage in a conversation that changes everything. This is the way Dale Bruner puts this interesting connection of the dogs: "Jesus' use of house-dogs is a step in a direction from which Jesus will never be able to retreat. The gentiles are no longer outside in the streets; they are now in the house. In a moment...they will be at the table."

This woman (I wish we could give her a name) is masterful to pick up on this and makes a couple of important challenges during this whole exchange. At the very beginning - definitely don't miss this - she challenges the disciples' reverence of Jesus. She is the one that cries out, "Lord, Son of David". The disciples don't give Jesus any of this respect. Those four words say: "I recognize you're for the Jewish people, you're from the line of David, that means something, I get it. But if I can say (as a Canaanite woman) that you are Lord even in this region, what does that say about the power I know you have for all. Power even for me, in this desperate situation, the pain of knowing that as we're having this conversation my daughter is being tormented by demons. Her address of Jesus goes

³ John 4:1-11

⁴ Bruner, Dale. *Churchbook: Matthew's Commentary*. Page 553

straight up to the throne of God's power. Her request goes straight down to hell for the demons attacking her daughter. The pain of a mother will always be at least as great as the pain of the daughter. This I know from experience.

What I want to know – and what always creates some debate – did Jesus change his mind about what he's going to do? Did Jesus change his mind in this case? Before he could change his mind, did his attitude toward this woman change? After he might have changed his mind, did his mission change? Something definitely shifted in the course of the conversation. Is that possible for the Messiah?

Jesus does not send the woman away as the disciples wanted. And after some silence, he said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." He just told this woman he didn't come to help her. He came to help all of those on the other side of the border. You're on your own kid!

As readers in 2023, we would be right to say, "Wow. That sounds so elitist, so unfair, even racist." Five chapters earlier, Matthew records Jesus' words to his disciples as he sent them out on a missionary journey. He gave them these instructions: "Do not take a road leading to gentiles, and do not enter a Samaritan town, but go, rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus knew that at this point in his ministry and in history, he had one job: preach the good news to God's people, the Israelites.

But is it possible that God used this woman to show us something Jesus was still figuring out – the mission was going to extend to every corner of the world? The mission included her. It always had. Is it sacrilegious to say that Jesus was still discovering God's will in his own purpose? Why is this sacrilegious? Isn't that the life of a disciple – to ask God every day, "What's your will? I'll never know it fully, Lord, but what's the next step?"

At the first wedding Jesus was invited to, they wanted Jesus to do something when they ran out of wine. Jesus said, "My time has not yet come." His mother came along and said, "that's what you think!" The next step. He was figuring it out.⁵

At the end of his life, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he was reading the room, realizing that this was not going to end well, and he pleaded with God: "Father, if there's another way, so that I don't have to die tonight, please!

Let this cup pass from me... But not as I will, your will be done."

There were two occasions where Jesus healed someone on behalf of a gentile person who had great faith, and the only two times he healed from a distance, without even going with that person to see their loved one. This woman in our story, and another man, a centurion, a soldier from Capernaum.⁶ He understood Jesus' mission, too, and said, "I'm not worthy for you to enter my house, but I know you have authority from a distance to say the word and it will be done." And Jesus healed his servant on the spot.

After that occasion, Jesus said something totally different to him. He said, "I tell you, many will come from east and west and will take their places at the banquet with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven."

Now, all of a sudden, the doors are open? Something changed in Jesus' mission. The doors are opening. And they would continue to do so. Jesus' last words to his disciples reflect this in the new and great mission he was giving them: "Go out to – where? – What countries? – ALL nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."⁷ Whether Jesus changed his attitude, or his mind, or his mission, or whether it was a teaching moment for his disciples we'll never really know. I'd love to have you ponder the humanity versus divinity of Jesus on this question and get back to me with your thoughts.

We hear in those words of the Great Commission, we hear in our story today, and we hear throughout Scripture the two elements I promised I'd share with you that we need in the blueprints of the church we continue to build.

ONE – We baptize ALL nations. The doors of the church have to be open. It's a carry-over from last week that our mission has to constantly be changed to invite and include others into our experience as followers of Jesus. So, in case we have that one figured out now...

TWO – Jesus is the cornerstone. The foundation of all we do. Not us. Not our dreams. Our programs. Not our feel-good philosophies. Not a "whatever works for you" theology. The power is Jesus, and it took a woman from Canaan to point this out to the disciples. And what was the result? Her daughter was healed from that moment.

⁵ John 2:1-12

⁶ Matthew 8

⁷ Matthew 28:16-20

Often, we make our open doors an end in itself. We can't forget that they are open doors to something. Or rather, to Someone – that is, Jesus Christ. It's possible to be so excited to have new people exploring faith around us that we forget to give the words of the gospel to give them something real to have faith in.

A. W. Tozer quotes one of the last verses in the Bible, in Revelation,⁸ that says, "Let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' Let everyone who is thirsty, come." Then he warns that "Indeed, the church is carrying the gospel invitation far beyond its proper bounds, turning it into something more human and less divine than that found in the sacred Scriptures. What we tend to overlook is that "whoever" never stands by itself."⁹

"Whoever" is always paired with "believes" or "comes" or "hears." It is God that does the work, and it is Christ that is the object of believing and coming and hearing. We have to remember this as we open the doors.

The woman showed Jesus how open the doors were about to be. But it was the woman who did her homework somewhere, or was prompted by God's Spirit, to fall on her knees at those open doors and cry, "Lord, Son of David." I know who you are.

May we know Who Jesus is as our cornerstone.

One final connection that I don't want to miss: Jesus and the woman in their conversation are using an analogy of a dinner table and scraps that come from the table. You know how Chapter 15 ends? The feeding of the four-thousand. It happened in this same gentile region. After the miracle with bread and fish, Matthew writes that everyone ate and had enough. And there were seven large baskets of leftovers. Table scraps.

God's grace is wide enough that ALL who are invited will have more than enough. Will our doors be open wide enough?

God's power is strong enough to make it happen because of his sacrifice of love for us. Will the foundation of our church be set up on Jesus first in all things? This may be the greater challenge in our culture.

When we come to Jesus in our own pain, when we are filled with healing and grace, then the church we occupy can't help but overflow into other territories where we work or go to school, and even into other neighborhoods.

In a moment we're going to offer some prayer for the Reaching Out Ministry that took place yesterday at Bethany church on Fruitridge and 24th. What a great example of what it looks like when a church overflows into the community – when it can't help itself. I don't know who or how they got all of the clothes and supplies that were donated from our narthex to the Bethany parking lot, but it was a lot more than 7 basketfuls. I'm encouraged by doors of our church that continue to open. My challenge as we move into this Fall and talk more about building our church is that we find new and specific ways to point to Jesus as our definite source of grace and life that gives us the power to do it.

Amen.

1. Read Matthew 15:21-28 again. Look for any words, phrases, or themes you didn't notice before.
2. When you think of Faith church, what characteristics would you say are built into the "blueprints" of our church? In other words, what makes us who we are?
3. Why had Jesus left Jewish territory and found himself in Canaan? What do you think is the significance of this location?
4. How do you feel about the way this woman addressed Jesus ("Lord, Son of David")?
5. What "mission" did Jesus clearly understand for himself at this point and try to communicate to the woman? Did Jesus' attitude toward this woman change in these few verses?
6. Did Jesus change his mind about how he was going to respond to the woman? What factors were at work pulling him in different directions?
7. Did Jesus' mission actually change directions as a result of this encounter? What did Jesus teach his disciples about their work together?
8. Two aspects of "church-building" are lifted out of this Scripture - (1) Jesus as the foundation (cornerstone) and (2) Doors that are open to all. To which of these do we need to give more attention as a church? How about for you personally?

⁸ Rev 22:17

⁹ Tozer, A.W., *Daily Devotional by A. W. Tozer*, Aug 11, 2023.