

# The New Jesus

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,  
at the eleven o'clock service, August 14, 2011, The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost.  
Based on Matthew 15:10-28.*

I don't really like loud people. Mother always said that loudly drawing attention to one's self was not a good thing to do. I am fairly certain she thought this to be particularly true for women. I will be the first to say that there is so much wrong with that sentiment that I don't even know where to start. It has more *isms* in it than I can count; but in all honesty, I am sorry to say, it has had a lingering impact upon me. Loud, pushy people still not good. I check myself now because I have learned to do so, but deep inside I continue to find such behavior distasteful.

Today's gospel tells a story of such a woman. The disciples whined to Jesus that she was being pushy and bothersome. Did I mention that she also happened to be a Canaanite? That never helps. She definitely was not one of their own, a fact that made her outrageous behavior, as a woman in a culture where women were to be seen not heard, all the more offensive. Loud people who speak with accents other than our own, who are different from us, less genteel, who practice a religion or a way of living that deviates from ours, always seem worse.

But guess what? This Canaanite mother, who was the epitome of all these ways of being "other," was acting much more godly in the opening of this story than Jesus was. You see, she had this crazy daughter. Talk about loud and unpleasant; just try taking care of a teenager possessed by a demon. I once had one who was only occasionally possessed by a demon, and it wasn't a piece of cake. This tired, devoted mother was doing the best she could, but nothing was working.

Wherever Jesus went, people experienced healing. I have never known how that worked and still don't. But I know that as time passed and people remembered his life among them, stories got bigger and bigger about how amazingly healing it was just to be in his presence. I believe them. I don't know how spots stopped being leprous or how blind people started seeing or the lame started walking, but I think something about Jesus caused people who encountered him to live like they had never lived before. Miracles aside, it changed them for the better every time.

And any mother worth her salt would have done all she could to get some of that. So this woman, dragging her really messed up daughter behind her, is not about to be held away from the man who purportedly can help get her daughter back. Twelve possibly a bit self-satisfied, entitled disciples, feeling a little like rock stars themselves, were a minor interruption compared to what her life had been like. "Shouting after them," she was, the narrator says. I bet she was and that was the least of what she was prepared to do.

And in that moment she showed us something, I believe, about the way God loves us—like a ferocious mother—and it is a mighty thing. Now mothering, which is to say all parenting, is utterly imprecise and almost never without complication, and when we are honest we admit it's not even without condition. But mothering in its best sense—that unalterable love that sees all but loves anyway—is, in our limited ways of imagining God's love, about as close as we get.

Meanwhile Jesus was on a no-doubt much needed holiday to Tyre and Sidon, modern day Lebanon, which even today after decades of violence is one of the most beautiful places I have ever been. Mountains meeting the beach, a gentle breeze blowing, it was all there—a perfect place to be restored. So in full out vacation mode—it must have been August—Jesus was not terribly interested in this woman, observing in fact that he had really come only to take care of his own. When she persisted, the narrator claims that he said, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

*What?* Did Jesus just compare her and her kind to dogs? Yep, pretty much; that is what he did. We would call it at least a racial slur. Apparently Jesus in this instance was Jesus

the Jewish rabbi, a product and victim of his own culture. In this moment, his mission was parochial and exclusive, not even big enough to include some nearby clans.

But then something truly amazing happened: Jesus was converted. Confronted with love that looks for all the world like the love of God, Jesus got it. His blindness, dare we say, melted away in the face of such love: She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” The words pierced his heart, and all that was holding him back fell away. Once again Jesus was fully Jesus. I don't know how he made her child better, but he did. I don't know how long it lasted, but for that moment she was better: love like that is as powerful a force as there is in this world or beyond.

We call this story the “Healing of the Canaanite Woman's Daughter.” If we had the nerve, we might call it “The Conversion of Jesus.” Of course, that is not comfortable to us, to think of the historical Jesus in need of conversion. More typically we have approached this passage as a story about faithfulness and persistence, the clear implication being that we have to persist, to plead for what we need from God, a theologized view of the Western axiom that we receive only if we work really, really hard. However true that may be in some settings, it is a terrible lie when talking about the love of God. We get it because we *are*, because we exist, not because we earn it or convince God to give it.

This is really a story about Jesus, much more than about the mother—about Jesus' move from being a limited Jewish mystic, bound to and by his culture, to being a bearer of the Cosmic Christ, the One in whom there is no boundary, no exclusivity, but only the expansive love of a God who knows no limits. I am smart enough not to undertake putting a concise, fine theological point on that claim, but the story seems to be huge in its assertion about the continuing power of God to change us, all of us who live and breathe as children of God.

It was inevitable I suppose. On Friday I saw *The Help*. It is, after all, set in my hometown; it seemed like the only right thing to do. It isn't a perfect movie any more than it is a perfect book, but in a way that was dramatically true in my era of growing up in the South, this story bears witness to the fact that there were people who got it, who were changed, people who began to admit that the old boundaries that had worked so well for one side of the tracks had to be blown up. Skeeter, as the protagonist is tragically known—I actually knew a Skeeter or two, not, I suppose, so surprising for someone called Buddy—was not exactly Jesus, but she knew that some things were right and some things were wrong. And though the real heroines in the story were the African-American women who risked their lives to stare down some powerful, mean people, Skeeter was not without her own share of courage, a share not always grasped by more timid souls. As her mother tells her at the end of the story, “sometimes, honey, courage has to skip a generation.”

We are not there yet; the dance between courage and silence continues. Our versions of Canaanite women and men in Jackson, Mississippi, and, yes, in New York City still confront us. In fact, there is still enough brokenness in the world to break our hearts and the heart of God too; racism is alive and well. A black president has not even begun to make it all go away; in fact, in some cases his presence has exposed a slightly covered and dangerous brand of racism that persists in high and low places. We still ignore people, all kinds of people, who are different from us. And it damages our souls every time.

But, thank God, the final chapter has not been written. We are still in the process of being created. God has not finished and will be at work as long as life continues. The Apostle Paul says that not only are we waiting to be fully created but also the whole of creation is, still groaning in the pains of creation even to the present day. Thank God for those pains. They stretch us to be bigger than we have been, and they are the holiest pains in the entire world.

Fill us, O Lord, with the pains of a broken heart and crack us wide open so that your love can make us new again.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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