

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer; Amen.

How do you learn best? Perhaps you learn best in a classroom setting with a teacher talking to you with a prepared lesson. Perhaps you learn best with hands on experience, with someone guiding you as you complete a specific task. Perhaps you learn best visually; if you see something it is committed to your memory. Perhaps you learn best in a group setting where there is a vibrant and challenging discussion that causes your mind to be stretched or opened. There are many, many ways we can learn. Today during our sermon time together, I want you to consider two questions; the first question is are we willing to learn? And the second is can Jesus learn?

Any of you who have spent a significant amount of time with me may have noticed that I consider myself to be a lifelong learner. I believe that each person I meet, each person I sit and talk with, each situation I encounter has something to teach me. I genuinely am looking for that growth both in knowledge and in relationship. You may also know, if you have spent any amount of time with me, that I am terrible at math. In fact, I often do addition and subtraction by counting on my fingers. I have trouble seeing numbers, percentages and division in my head. I often tease that I was a religion major in college so I would only have to take one math class. On the flip side of that coin, I'm really good at English and at spelling. But in order for me to be an effective speller I need to visually see the words. You can't ask me to spell "anticipate" and me spell it without writing it down first. But if you get me a piece of paper and a pencil I can spell almost anything. That's how I learn. How do you learn best?

It seems to me as we read the gospel lesson for today, which may be one of my least favorite stories of all times, just simply for the difficulty of preaching, but it seems to me that

what we are experiencing is a learning moment for Jesus. There are two interpretations of our story. The first, and more traditional reading is that the Canaanite woman Matthew is describing passes some sort of a “faith test”. She proves to Jesus, who seems skeptical at first, that she indeed is a faithful woman and as a result of her faith, Jesus heals her daughter. But there is a second interpretation that I would like you to consider. Is it possible that the Canaanite woman persuades Jesus? Could she in fact have stretched Jesus understanding of what the kingdom of God actually looks like? Could Jesus have been swayed by the persistent and faithful witness of a woman desperate to save her child?

I’ve always said that hell hath no fury like a mother with a child who is sick or suffering. Over the course of my ministry I have experienced mothers from all different walks of life, those with money and those who have none, those from the city and those from the country, those who are married and those who are single mothers, those who suffer from alcoholism and drug addiction and those who have always been clean, those who have family support and those who have none, none of that matters, each of them has given everything to save their children from death or illness. That was particularly true on the cancer unit of the children’s hospital at Geisinger. The mothers I encountered were up to date on experimental treatments, each vowing and aggressively trying to have their child be a candidate to extend their life expectancy. They were there in the beds holding their children as they went through chemo. They were holding them when they cried and were there playing with them in the hallways when they were feeling up to it. Those mothers’ amazed me. So it’s no surprise to me when the Canaanite woman puts everything on the table when she encounters Jesus for the sake of her daughter. And in the end it seems to work for her. But in the beginning I wasn’t sure.

We have Jesus approaching the district of Tyre and Sidon. What do we know about that region of the world? We know that they have not responded well to Jesus and the healings and miracles he has been performing. So I imagine Jesus was already on edge. And we have the Canaanite woman approaching Jesus and calling out “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David!” It seems like a peculiar greeting to me. As I did some research on what exactly it meant, I learned that by claiming Jesus’ lineage she is connecting herself to Jesus’ people. She’s saying she too is a descendant of Ruth and Tamar and Rahab. But did that sway Jesus into response? No. She calls Jesus Lord, indicating he is her teacher, that she wanted to learn from him. But did that sway Jesus? No. And she cries out “have mercy on me!” Indicating she is aware of his power and connectedness to God, and the “on me” part indicates that what is happening to her daughter is also happening to her. But did that sway Jesus? No. He doesn’t answer her at all. It even appears the disciples are getting annoyed with her. And they tell Jesus to send her away. They are tired of listening to her cries, of her desperation. Again, showing us her persistence. And Jesus responds, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Does Jesus really believe that? Is his scope of heaven that small, that God only wants him to save the people of Israel?

While I probably would have been standing there, scratching my head, the woman takes this as her opportunity to change Jesus’ mind. In her desperation she kneels in front of Jesus, and cries “Lord help me!” He responds with a puzzling quip about dogs. You see in a Jewish world household pets were not common. But in a Gentile or Greek world they had more experience with household pets, especially dogs. And those dogs, they allowed to eat under the table, unlike the Jewish custom which had any animals eating separately and outside. The Canaanite woman says to Jesus in plain English, “You have to help me. You can heal my daughter while you’re

seeking those lost souls of the house of Israel. They don't have to be exclusive. They don't have to be separate. Even we, who aren't Jews, have to eat. God's promise is good enough for us too." You see in Greek and Gentile custom the pets were fed by the master while the children were eating. She's desperately claiming her faith, by acknowledging Jesus' power.

Can't you just hear the fear in her voice? Can't you hear the desperation she has for her daughter's life? And after what I'm sure felt like forever Jesus responds, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. In this instance it's not the amount of her faith that is great, but it is the fact that she just holds on. One of the commentators I was reading in preparation for my sermon said, "Never underestimate the power of a persistent woman and the God in whom she believes." It seems as though the Canaanite woman's persistence stretched the mind of Jesus and showed him that the kingdom of God is perhaps even bigger than he imagined. Or at the very least she made him stop and listen to her, pushed him to reconsider, and to perhaps learn and grow.

What about the second question I asked you at the beginning of our time together? It seems that Jesus in his humanity can and did learn, are willing to learn too? What question or questions is our faith causing us to ask? How can we better reach out to the community around us? How can we better instill our faith in the members who worship here? How can we grow and learn from one another? The kingdom of God is big, bigger than we can ever imagine. How persistent are we in seeking God's will for our lives and for the lives of our church family?

Today my prayer for you is that you will diligently and persistently seek relationship with Jesus. I pray that you seek him with the same love and the same desire that he actively seeks you. I pray that you are open to learning and to growing in your faith and in your life with him. I pray that you can see all the good things that he has to offer you and that he has offered you through

the people in your life. I pray that you seek God first and know that all the rest will fall into play, with Jesus saying to you as he did to the Canaanite woman, “Great is your faith.” Amen.