



THE  
PLYMOUTH  
PULPIT



watch the sermons | [plymouthchurch.org](http://plymouthchurch.org)

# “Knocking Down Walls”

Matthew 15:21-28

**Brett Younger**  
**Senior Minister**

July 23, 2023

*Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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."*

*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."*

*He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."*

*But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."*

*He answered, "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."*

*She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."*

*Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."*

*And her daughter was healed instantly.*

*Matthew 15:21-28*

Mark Twain wrote, "France has neither winter nor summer nor morals. Apart from these drawbacks, it's a fine country."

Americans have a history of disliking the French. One stereotype is that the French are smelly, lazy, and rude. Years ago, I am on the train from London to Paris. We bought our tickets at the last minute so I end up several rows away from Carol with a French family—mother, daughter, and son, going home where papa's waiting. I had

never been with a French family for three hours, and they are not what I had been led to believe. They smell fine. They are not lazy. They are nice.

The eleven-year-old, Charlotte, offers me potato chips. I say “Merci”—which exhausts my French.

She says she “speaks a little English,” but she is fluent.

Her mother smiles and says something in French which I assume is,

“Honey, try to remember that you’re speaking to a doofus who only knows one language.”

Her eight-year-old brother Alexander speaks as much English as I speak French, but we play ten games of tic-tac-toe and I uphold my country’s honor. He pulls out a deck of cards and suggests we play “bat tell” which takes me a while to figure out is “battle.” That is the game where you put down your card without looking, whoever has the highest card wins. It is not the most challenging game, so after a while we start cheating.

I learn to count “un, deux, trois” and he learns, “one, two, three.”

I try to think of something that crosses the barriers between our two nations. I point to myself and say, “Luke Skywalker” and point to him and say, “Darth Vader.”

He laughs, “No, no, no,” points to himself, and says, “Obi Wan.”

You have heard Americans pretending to have a cheesy French accent say, “Ho, ho, ho.” I always thought it was a joke, but Alexander does that. Nothing terribly inspiring happened, nothing worthy of mention in a sermon, but I had a charming trip with a delightful family from France.

That is how privileged people want to think we will get rid of prejudice. We will have some nice conversations and realize everybody is nice. We will stop thinking about race and everything will be fine. We may want to be naïve, but it is harder than that.

When it comes to racism, there is so much I do not know. Every time someone is murdered for the color of their skin, our hearts break, but it is different for a white person. I have an easier life because of the color of my skin. I have advantages I take for granted. I was taught to ignore the role privilege plays in my life.

I do not know what it is like be the mother of a teenager who is afraid because of the color of her son's skin. I do not know what it is like to be an African American and know the best health care is less available to me. I do not know what it is like to know I am more likely to be questioned by police.

I do not know what it is like to know that some people who have never met me do not want me living next door. I do not know what it is like to be concerned that my child's teacher expects less of my child. I do not know what it is like to be an African-American when the Supreme Court says that affirmative action for minority students is illegal, but preferential treatment for the children of rich, white parents is just fine.

In the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, getting past racism is hard. I pick the biblical texts for worship about four months in advance. So sometime in March, I looked at the texts for today and decided this was the story I wanted to preach. I am sure I had a good reason, but I cannot remember what it was.

This is one of the most troubling stories in the gospels. A distraught mother wants Jesus to heal her daughter of demons, epilepsy, or schizophrenia. Jesus responds with what seems to be racist chauvinistic behavior. Jesus is never less woke, less politically correct, or less Christian.

Biblical scholars try to make the story less offensive. Maybe Jesus is testing the woman or the disciples. He is pretending to be rude. Perhaps Jesus is tired. Maybe Matthew and Mark, who also tells this story, got it wrong. Jesus could be kidding around. Elton Trueblood offers the peculiar argument that this is a humorous dialogue, utilizing Hebrew comedy routines that even the authors of the gospels do not recognize.

Maybe one of those explanations is right. Maybe. But taking scripture seriously does not mean making it easy. It should be hard to explain these harsh words.

Jesus is in Gentile territory. In Matthew's Gospel, this is the only occasion on which Jesus steps outside Israel's borders. The Canaanites were ancient enemies. The description is peculiar, because there have been no Canaanites in 500 years. It is like calling a visitor from Denmark a Viking. In his version, Mark calls the woman Syrophenician, which makes more sense. The point is that this is the first Gentile woman with whom Jesus deals. Something in the color of her skin, the shape of her face, her accent, or her clothing makes her seem less important.

She shouts, "Have mercy on me, Son of David. My daughter is sick. She's suffering terribly."

She knows what they are thinking: "She's not Jewish. She's female. She doesn't believe what we believe. There's no way she's going to get help here."

Sure enough, Jesus walks by without saying anything. He does not speak to her. Jesus' silence is familiar, but she is persistent. She cries. She begs. The Greek suggests she screams continuously. She is desperate for Jesus to heal her daughter. The disciples, taking their cue from Jesus' silence, want Jesus to tell her to go home. Imagine a mother being treated with such prejudice when she is just trying to get help for her troubled child.

Jesus' second response is more troubling than his silence, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

When she finally gets Jesus to answer it is with an insult. Jesus says she is a different nationality and that makes her and her daughter unworthy of his attention. You might think she would walk away, but it is not the first time she has faced prejudice. She refuses to leave.

This stubborn woman falls on her knees at the feet of this homeless Jewish handyman and pleads: "Lord, help me."

Jesus looks down at the woman and says, "It's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

Some have tried to soften the tone by saying the word for "dog" could mean "puppy." It does not matter, because it is still a dog.

And calling a woman a dog was an even bigger insult then than it is now. No matter how you try to explain it, it is impossible to get rid of the sting. This does not sound like Jesus.

What would we have done if we were the woman who has just been called a "dog" by the healer from whom we need help? Most of us would have been looking for the exit, but this woman's sense of urgency is greater than

her fear of rejection. She is remarkable. She has been dismissed by the disciples and insulted by Jesus.

But she looks up at Jesus, stares into his eyes, and tries to turn this horrible insult into a gentle picture, a pet under the table that begs for a bite of food: “Perhaps you’re right, Jesus. Maybe I am lowly in the scheme of things. But don’t even lowly animals deserve some crumbs and scraps from the table so that they don’t starve?”

She could have added, “Checkmate.” This is the only place in scripture where someone beats Jesus in a debate. When Jesus recognizes that he has been met heart to heart and word for word by a woman whose determination is every bit as deep as her concern for her daughter, he moves from insult to affirmation.

Jesus smiles and says, “What chutzpah! That’s a great answer. You’re right. Go home. Your daughter’s healed.”

Could it be that this nameless woman helps Jesus understand that God’s grace is for more than just Israel? Some believe that Jesus walked around wondering what the disciples will think if he explains that the earth actually revolves around the sun, but in the Bible Jesus struggles to learn what is true.

The scripture says Jesus “grew in wisdom” and was “tempted as we are.”

He knows firsthand the difficulty of overcoming prejudice.

Jesus is willing to expand his understanding of his own ministry. This woman helps Jesus see that the kingdom is bigger than he has been taught. She helps Jesus extend compassion to people he had been told to look down on.

Jesus grew up in a world where, like today, the religious institutions encouraged prejudice. The leaders in

the synagogues taught male Jews to pray,

“God, thank you that I am not a Gentile or a woman.”  
As a child Jesus listened to Joseph, his uncles, and grandfathers pray this prayer.

They drew boundaries that said, “Our kind are different from their kind.

Our kind do not mix with their kind. Our kind is better. Our kind is God’s kind.”

Jesus inherited prejudices from his family, culture, and religion. He initially responds to the Canaanite woman exactly as you would expect a man raised in the synagogue to respond, but Jesus overcomes the evil he has been taught when he says, “Let it be done for you as you wish” and heals the little girl.

Like you, I grew up in a prejudiced environment from which I will be in recovery for the rest of my life. We have been taught to fear strangers, to see “them” as frightening. We have learned to make decisions based on our prejudice. We know how to make snap judgments. How many seconds does it take to decide if we like someone? We have been taught a perspective that keeps our hearts small.

It is hard, but necessary for us to ask, “Who am I prejudiced against?” It is a different list for each one, but we have a list. Who is on our list? People who cannot stop looking at their phones, people who insist on getting on the train before letting others get off, people with the wrong politics, Russians, Muslims, and Southern Baptists.

Who are the people we avoid? Those we consider beneath us or above us,

Those too poor, too rich, too young, too old.



Who makes us uncomfortable? A mother who nags, a father who yells, a child who will not listen, the brother-in-law you wish your sister had not married, the person at work who does not work.

Who would we rather leave out? People who are not funny, who are always complaining, who waste our time, who talk about things we do not care about, who do not like us, who are not like us.

The work of Christians is to dismantle prejudice. Like Jesus, we have to engage marginalized and desperate souls. We have to hear the calling of God in those who are hurting. We have to do better.

Do not laugh at racist, sexist, ageist, homophobic jokes, or assumptions. Try to get to know people different than us. Do not just look for things in common. Celebrate the differences. Be vocal in opposing discriminatory views and practices.

Explore the unfamiliar. Attend events where you are in the minority. Open our children to diversity. Discuss shows, movies and books that present stereotypes. Support anti-prejudice and anti-racist organizations. Make our church better.

Wally Fletcher writes, "The story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman provides no easy answers to the problem of prejudice. It does not tell us how or when the world will be rid of the warfare and suffering that goes on every day because of bigotry. What it says is that we have to face these things. With great faith it promises that God will be there when we do. God might be there in pleading eyes, a strained encounter, outrage, conscience, or recovered empathy. But, God will be there! And, because of this, justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness will roll down like a mighty stream!"

You and I need to let God help us understand that we are all God's children.

*sermon © Brett Younger*