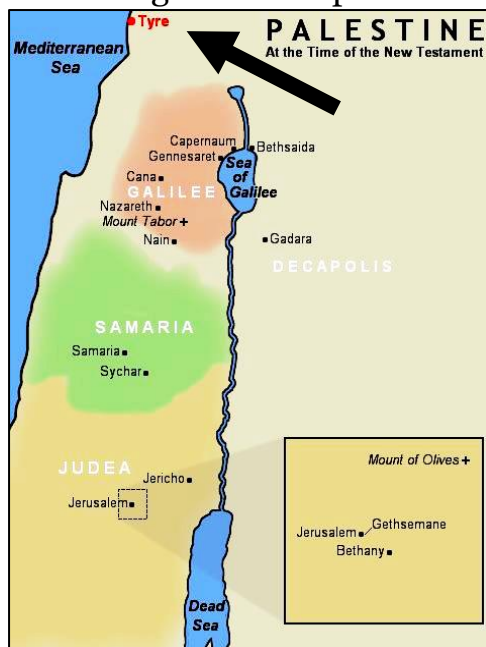


Sermon Notes: August 20, 2023. **Focus:** Syrophenician Woman, Matthew 15
[Lectionary Readings](#)

My first sermon with you all was on Welcome Home Sunday August 20, 2017. It focused on the Syrophenician woman. She is celebrated for waking Jesus up to people different than him. I can't believe how quickly six years can add up. Even in this short span, it seems like our culture has become even more adept at othering individuals, creating camps of us versus them, and disregarding whole groups of people. So, let me remind you who this woman was in the gospel, where she was from, and why she is important.

Geography of Matthew 15 *Jesus... 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.* Tyre is in region of Syrophenicia (near the coast northwest of the Galilee) and is the setting of the Gospel.



Jesus is not on home turf in Matthew 15. The region of the Galilee to the southeast of Tyre was his homebase. He branched out into an area full of non-Jewish people. Tyre was a pitstop from the fights with the Pharisees.

The “Canaanite or Gentile” woman is God’s voice – He came to Tyre under-the-radar for two reasons. First, he wanted to take care of “his people” (the Jews) in this predominately Gentile area. Second, that fight with the Pharisees likely wore him out. But as it goes with much of Jesus’ ministry, under-the-radar and rest doesn’t work out because this woman found him and insisted on his help.

The Syrophenician woman Matthew writes that the woman in the story is called a “Canaanite” woman. Jesus and the Canaanite woman encapsulate a *big* story of how God is for Jew and Gentile alike. He needed a nudge to readjust his mission for everyone! She reminds him that there is an abundance of mercy to go around. She was not asking for equality exactly, nor a seat at the table, but she tells Jesus that even scraps of grace can heal, restore, and bless. We can take it all the way and know that scraps from the table are not enough. Everyone has a voice and seat at the table of God.

More detail...Canaanites, Old Testament In the Bible, the Canaanites were an ancient Semitic people who inhabited the land of Canaan (roughly modern-day Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, and parts of Jordan and Syria). The Canaanites are

frequently mentioned in the Old Testament, particularly in the context of the Israelites' conquest of the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua.

The Old Testament term "Canaanite" is often used interchangeably with "Amorite" or "Hittite," referring to the inhabitants of the land before the Israelite settlement. The Canaanites were known for their polytheistic religion and their connection to various city-states, each with its own deity. The Israelites considered the Canaanite religion to be idolatrous, which played a significant role in their religious and territorial conflicts.

The conquering Jews were not immune to stereotyping and “othering” any more than we are. Othering served their territorial aspirations. I think in our own day social media has made othering people almost invisible to us. When do you reflexively ‘other’ a person? It took work for Jesus to take off his othering glasses to see the woman in need before him, but he did it, and so can we.

Canaanites in the New Testament In the New Testament, the term "Canaanite" is mentioned in the context of the twelve disciples of Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 10:2-4), one of the disciples is referred to as "Simon, who is called the Canaanite" or "Simon the Cananaean." The term "Canaanite" here might be better understood as "Zealot" suggesting that Simon was associated with a group of Jewish zealots who were committed to the overthrow of Roman rule. That seems like a very different understanding than how the Book of Joshua understood the term.

Now, regarding the story of the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24-30 and Matthew 15:21-28: A woman of Canaanite or Syrophenician origin comes to Jesus, pleading for him to heal her daughter who was demon-possessed. At first, Jesus insults her like a dog and says she is not part of Israel so he can't be bothered. She responds in a way that gets his attention. She says that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table. By doing so, she acknowledges the distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles (non-Jews) but also emphasizes her trust in Jesus' power which inspires him to heal her daughter.

The term "Canaanite" in this context underscores that she is more generally a foreigner to him. She is not Roman elite, but a run of the mill Gentile, non-Jew. The term "Canaanite" in the Old Testament refers to an ancient Semitic people inhabiting the Promised Land before the Israelite settlement. In the New Testament, it also relates to one of Jesus' disciples and his association with a group of zealots as well as a stand in for “foreigner.” I am thankful for Jesus' willingness to extend healing to ‘average’ foreigners like us. Jesus woke up from his casual othering of this woman and we can too.

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