

Fr. Curtis Miller August 19-20, 2023 Homily for the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

The story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman can be troubling. Jesus seems dismissive of this poor woman and her plight. He might even seem rude or racist toward someone of a different ethnicity. It's not the Jesus we expect to encounter. So it's important to clarify a couple things. First of all, Jesus is not racist, rude, or mean. There is an important context that helps makes sense of Jesus' interactions with this Canaanite woman. (Also, this story has nothing to do with the people who live in Vermont's northeastern most town.)

Before we get to the Canaanites, let's first recall the special role that the Jews had in God's plan for salvation of all humanity. They were God's chosen people, meant to be a "light to the nations," to reveal the existence of the one, true God, the loving Father of us all. The Jews were to bear witness to their faith in the one, true God to all their neighboring nations. These pagan nations believed in a whole pantheon of rival, competing gods. Each nation had its own gods, not seeing any of them as the one, true God of all. These gods seem a lot more like human beings—petty, jealous, and capricious—just bigger and more powerful versions of human beings, with all the same flaws. And they often fought among themselves; just read *The Iliad* for an example of that. The people of many nations even believed that their gods demanded evils, like human sacrifices. This was true of the Canaanites, who even sacrificed their children to their gods (whom the Israelites identified as demons). Consider the description of the Canaanites from the Book of Wisdom, Chapter 12:

“For truly, the ancient inhabitants of Your holy land, whom You hated for deeds most odious—works of sorcery and impious sacrifices; these merciless murderers of children, devourers of human flesh, and initiates engaged in a blood ritual, and parents who took with their own hands defenseless lives, You willed to destroy by the hands of our ancestors, that the land that is dearest of all to You might receive a worthy colony of God's servants.”

As this passage references, God drove the Canaanites out of their land, along with their wicked deeds, to make room for the Israelites to move in, grow, and flourish. The Canaanites and their descendants were the ancient enemies of Israel. Interestingly though, Canaan was the original name of the Holy Land, the Promised Land, to which Abraham went. He would have known the land by that name. It wasn't called Israel until the time of Abraham's grandson, Jacob, to whom God gave the name of Israel, meaning “one who struggles with God.” So the Canaanites had a prior claim to this land and God drove them out. That might not sit well with us. We might think of the way that in this country the Native American people were driven from their land in the name of Manifest Destiny, and all the evils associated with that dispossession. The idea of God favoring a particular nation, Israel, and dispossessing others doesn't sit well with our modern sensibilities. Yet there is more to the story. Yes, God pushed the Canaanites from their land so that Israel could move in and flourish, but it was for the purpose of Israel being able to share with the whole world the good news that there is one, true God, the loving Father and Creator of us all. God didn't forget the Canaanites. Rather, through Israel and the message of His love that they shared with the world, God eventually blessed the Canaanites (and all the Gentiles) more than they would have been if they had just remained in their land.

It was actually quite surprising that God chose Israel, a small, seemingly insignificant nation, to bear such an important message to the world. Afterall, He could have chosen the mighty Egyptians or Babylonians, Greeks or Romans, instead of tiny Israel, defeated, enslaved, exiled, and occupied time after time. But God always picks the weak and the small to serve His purposes so as to show His almighty power. It's easy to work through the mighty and powerful, but much harder to work through the weak and the small. That's why God has chosen us, you and I, who are small and insignificant in the eyes of the world to follow Him and share our Faith with all the world.

I tried to come up with an analogy that might explain why God chose one nation, Israel, to bear the message of His existence to all nations, instead of just telling everyone at once. Imagine if you were in a large building, filled with many people, and you saw a fire. You would want to let everyone know, but you wouldn't do that by going door to door and telling each person individually. You would want to run to the nearest fire alarm and pull it. You might tell the people you met in the hallway, but your primary objective would be to get to that fire alarm. Israel, in this analogy, is God's fire alarm. He chose them to be the first to receive His message, not because He didn't care about the other nations, but precisely because they would broadcast His message to the rest of the world. Israel was geographically located at the crossroads of several different regions, making it an ideal spot out of which to radiate God's message, revealing Himself to the world. The very fact that they were trampled down by one powerful empire after another actually helped to spread this message, as exiled Jews carried their beliefs to new lands.

Israel's initial way of interacting with the pagan peoples, including the Canaanites, was to fight, kill, and drive them away. The danger was too great that the Israelites might observe the pagan practices of the neighboring nations, like child sacrifice, and start to imitate them, and thus fail to live up to their essential mission of revealing the one, true God to all the world. If this seems farfetched, consider how some kings married pagan princesses, like Ahab who married the Canaanite Jezebel, and then abandoned their faith in God to worship pagan deities and commit atrocities in the name of these deities.

The full flourishing of the blessing for all the nations through Israel came in the fullness of time with the birth of Jesus, born as a man, as an Israelite. We see that Jesus came to finally reveal Himself to all the nations, starting with the Magi, pagan astrologers from the east, who came to pay homage to Him at His birth in Bethlehem. And just before His ascension back into Heaven, we see Jesus give His Great Commission to His Apostles, to proclaim the Gospel to and baptize people of all nations. Yet in today's Gospel reading, we see Jesus seemingly ignoring and insulting a woman, just because she is a Gentile. What's going on here? Afterall, this woman seems to be exactly the kind of person who is open to Jesus' message. She apparently has great faith in the God of Israel and in Jesus Himself. She is a good Canaanite, abandoning her ancestors' practice of child sacrifice, she is a mother who lovingly cares for her daughter. It's as if, because she has refused to sacrifice her daughter to a demon, the demon is retaliating by just taking her anyway and possessing her. This is exactly the kind of person Jesus came to save. And yet, at first, He seems to just ignore her, insisting that His mission is first to the children of Israel. Significantly, He does not send her away. Jesus' Apostles are annoyed by her, and ask Jesus to send her away, but He doesn't. He is preparing to teach them a lesson about how great

her faith is. Even when Jesus apparently compares her to a dog, she doesn't give up, but instead cleverly points out that even though the dog comes after the children, the dog can still be a beloved member of the family and will be served in turn. The Canaanite woman displays great faith, for which Jesus praises her. Having put her faith to the test, Jesus answers her plea, and her daughter is healed in that moment. Jesus teaches His Apostles that true faith can be found, even among foreigners whom they would have looked down upon before. It prepares them to eventually carry His Gospel to all people.

We take it for granted today that it's natural to share our Faith with others and to encourage them to convert to our Faith. But that is actually a radical innovation of Jesus and the Church that He established. Ancient Jews didn't go around trying to get others to become Jews, and neither did the people of other nations proselytize others to their pagan religions. You were born into your religion, just like you were born into your nationality and language. You had your nation's religion, just as people of other nations had theirs. It's a testimony to the success of Christianity that we take it for granted that we would want to share our Faith with all the world.

And you and I can also learn from the faith of the Canaanite woman. Oftentimes, we pray for something, and we want it now. We want to have had it yesterday. But she was patient and trusting. She didn't arrogantly insist that God grant her demand that instant. If He wanted her to wait, she trusted that that was for the best. She knew that God had a bigger plan, and she trusted that He would answer her prayer in His own good time, and it would be for the best. When we have patient, trusting faith like that in God, we bear a witness to God that might well be an inspiration to others, just as ancient Israel was a light to the nations.