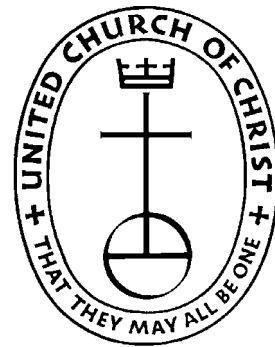


Feeling Rejected

A Sermon By —
JERALD M. STINSON
April 11, 2010



This sermon about Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman discusses how we may deal with rejection, drawing on a sermon from a young theological student which encourages us to persist in the face of rejection, remembering that "the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing."

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
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Rev. Jerald Stinson
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Readings: Matthew 15:21-28

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There is a story about Jesus to which I have returned over and over in my preaching. It is a story I find compelling because it is so out of place in the gospel narratives. It is about Jesus at a weak moment, a moment of insensitivity and prejudice.

There are two versions of the story – one in Mark, one in Matthew. Listen today to Matthew's version:

Jesus withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. It happened that a Canaanite woman living in that area came and cried out to Jesus, "Heir to the House of David, have pity on me! My daughter is horribly demon-possessed."

Jesus gave her no word of response. The disciples came up and repeatedly said to him, "Please get rid of her. She keeps calling after us." Finally Jesus turned to the woman and said, "My mission is only to the lost sheep of Israel." She then prostrated herself before him, pleading, "Help me, Rabbi!" He answered, "But it isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

"True, Rabbi," she replied, "but even the dogs get to eat the scraps that fall from the table." Jesus said in reply, "Woman, you have great faith! Your wish will come to pass." At that moment her daughter was healed.

This is a difficult story! Jesus behaves in an unflattering and unexpected way, with sarcasm, prejudice and cruelty. He even called the woman a dog.

Theologian Robert McAfee Brown wrote what seems to be obvious: "Where we stand determines what we see." He said, "If you are on a high sand dune, and I am on the beach below, you can see ships hidden from my eyes. In the 60s those black and eligible for the draft saw the Vietnam War in a different way than those who were white with a college deferment. Where we stand determines what we see."

Chaim Potok's novels focus on orthodox Judaism. In *The Gift of Asher Lev*, Lev's religious community felt his free style art should be censored. When Asher spoke to a yeshiva class, the children knew their parents considered Lev a traitor to their heritage. So he tried to help them see art as a way of expressing feelings, a means through which many interpretations of the same reality could be portrayed.

On a blackboard, with orange chalk, Lev drew a child's representation of a ram: spindly legs, poorly proportioned body, scraggly horns. Then with a single unbroken line, he drew a second ram with realistic contour, shading its underside to give an appearance of three dimensionality. Then he drew an abstraction of a ram, exaggerating the contours of its hindquarters to give emphasis to its power. The children could not figure out which one was real. He told them all three drawings were true, just from different perspectives.

Then he began to draw the face of the yeshiva teacher. First in the style of Matisse. Then like Modigliani with exaggerated cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes. Then like Picasso, solid, Iberian, a creature more stone than flesh with penetrating eyes. Three different ways of seeing the same person.

Well, so it is with the stories about Jesus. We each read them through lenses shaped by our own experiences. What we see depends on where we are standing. And what we see one time, may not be the same the next time we return to the story.

I am fascinated by the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman. I preached my first sermon about it here, focusing on Jesus learning that all people are children of God – a sermon about inclusion.

Then I preached a second sermon in which I shared several ways of understanding the story growing out of a discussion at a small gathering of multi-racial activist UCC clergy. I told how four of us saw it in very different ways. Like Asher Lev's drawings of the ram and the teacher, several rich and provocative understandings of this passage came alive in that discussion.

A female colleague serving a challenging Spanish-speaking urban congregation knew what it meant to be dismissed by others, by people who felt she wasn't a "real" minister because she was a woman. So when she read this biblical story, her eyes were not on Jesus but on the Canaanite woman – a strong passionate woman struggling for that in which she believed; a woman in a patriarchal society who would not take "no" for an answer.

Biblical scholar Leonard Swidler said, "This is the only recorded instance wherein Jesus was bested in a verbal exchange – and it is by a foreign woman."

The second interpretation came from an African American colleague serving an impoverished church in Oakland. Of the Canaanite woman, he said, "She's my mamma." She was like his mother who raised seven children and held a family together.

Some of you know Art Cribbs, the minister at our San Marino church. His eyes went to Jesus, not to the woman. He said Jesus had withdrawn to Phoenicia. This was a retreat. Jesus needed time away from the crowds. He couldn't be expected to always help everyone.

And Art reminded us that Jesus was a Jewish Palestinian peasant ministering to other peasants. He speculated that the Canaanite woman was perhaps rich and powerful. Jesus was worn out from helping his own struggling people. Was it wrong to say he needed all his effort and energy for his own people who didn't have the resources, wealth and power this woman might have had?

So three very different ways of looking at this story. Then I shared my perspective – that the story showed a moment of weakness for Jesus, a moment when his idealism was overcome by the nationalism and racism of his culture. For me, at that time, what I saw in the story and still do, was a very human Jesus who had to overcome his own prejudices.

And in the words of theologian Elizabeth Moltmann: “From a double underprivileged human being, a woman and a foreigner, the man Jesus learned to see with fresh eyes divine generosity and divine will to be present for all human beings. This nameless Canaanite woman opened for Jesus the way to other nations, races and religions.”

So that was a sermon about four different ways of understanding the story. Then a couple years ago, I came back to the story again in my third sermon about it, focusing on the plight of the homeless, looking at how we seem comfortable excluding people.

And now, I am returning to the story again; this morning will be my fourth sermon about it. Why? Because of another preacher's take on it. The Divinity School at Harvard's alumni magazine had a few paragraphs last year from a sermon by Shaundra Cunningham who won the Billings Preaching Prize Competition. Those paragraphs fascinated me, so I went to the listed website and listened to the sermon. I was intrigued by Cunningham's focus on why the woman persisted in challenging Jesus and how she dealt with his rejection. I had never looked at the story that way.

So let me share some of her sermon with you. This is the shocking way in which that young theological student began, addressing a room filled with faculty and fellow students.

How do you respond when Jesus acts like a jackass? How do you react when the one who is supposedly without sin shows a stunningly reprehensible side? What do you

do when you seek answers, when you seek assistance, when you seek a miracle worker but you find more barriers, you receive no help and you are quickly dismissed?

She went on:

In our text, we find an unusual encounter with Jesus. We see a troubling and frightening side of Jesus. It is disturbing because Jesus becomes the quintessential gate keeper. The text shows us a Canaanite woman who was on a mission. She had a desperate situation: her daughter was possessed by an evil spirit, and she was determined to get help for her child. Realizing that Jesus is within reach, she seeks help. She begs Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter.

Now remember, Ms. Cunningham was preaching in a university context, so she went on:

Unfortunately, the woman didn't realize that Jesus was on break. He was on sabbatical. He wasn't checking email messages and he wasn't holding office hours. He had no time to hear about her concerns or her issues. He really didn't want to be bothered.

But this was her child, this was her baby.

Let me leave her words for a moment. In the gospel stories, those who came to Jesus for assistance were often desperate loved ones who hoped he could help a struggling child or friend. Remember the Roman Centurion with his child, or those who cut a hole in someone's roof to lower an ailing friend into Jesus' presence. This woman was desperate.

Back to Shaundra Cunningham's words:

Jesus displays an elitist and, dare I say, xenophobic side when he dehumanizes this woman because she is not a Jew. She was a Greek, a Gentile, a stranger to the commonwealth of Israel. Jesus says, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' In other words, 'I don't want anything to do with you people.' Jesus didn't want to be bothered in the first place, but now that the woman finally has his attention and can make her petition, Jesus shows an ugly side. He calls this woman a dog!

He hides behind a cloak of morality. He doesn't own up to his intolerance. Instead he makes it a matter of right versus wrong, saying, "Let the children eat first. For it is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.

[Cunningham continued:] *Now the problem this woman faces is common to each of us – that is, rejection. How do we handle our rejections? We can handle being dis-*

missed by folk we really don't care about, but it cuts like a knife when we get rejected by one in whom all our trust is built.

Now until I listened to Shaundra Cunningham's sermon, I hadn't connected this story to the ways we handle rejection. And I think all of us get rejected at various points in our lives.

We apply for a new job and don't get it. We apply to get into a certain school and don't make the cut. A child we may have raised and nurtured gets angry and rejects us. A lover, a spouse, a partner walks out, rejecting us, choosing to be with someone else. We spend years working for a particular company or organization, and then suddenly we're rejected. We all know rejection.

So how might we have reacted to Jesus' words, to learning he wouldn't help, to being called a dog. Perhaps we would simply give up and walk away depressed, feeling like a loser. Or we might storm out of there in anger. Or perhaps we would scream at him, swear at him, call him something derogatory for having called us a dog.

But let me return to Shaundra Cunningham's sermon:

This Canaanite woman did the unthinkable: in the midst of being castigated, she helped Jesus recognize who he was and what he would become. She helped Jesus act like Jesus. [I love that phrase – she helped Jesus act like Jesus.]

When Jesus calls her a dog, the first words out of her mouth are: "Yes, Rabbi." He called her a dog, a dummy, an outsider, a piece of trash. And she took it. And with an uncanny wit, she retorted that even the dogs under the Master's table eat the children's crumbs. In other words, you can call me a dog but you still have to give me what I came for.

Ms. Cunningham went on:

This woman understood what Steven Covey meant when he said, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." Jesus called her a dog but she didn't curse at him. She didn't take it personal and go home. She didn't let Jesus off the hook. Because she knew that her main thing was to get help for her daughter. She couldn't afford to allow his insult to deter her from the main thing. This woman knew what and who she came for.

Leaving Cunningham's sermon, I vividly remember a scene in the 1985 film *Out of Africa*, when an affluent Danish expatriate falls to her knees at a fancy social event, pleading with a colonial governor on behalf of some African workers. The Canaanite

woman fell to her knees before Jesus. Alicia Faxon wrote, "Her love for her child made her disregard the usual reticence of women's conduct." She was a model of love, a parent passionately trying to help a child.

No anger runs deeper than the anger of feeling your child isn't getting a fair chance. Our oldest daughter Kristina attended the high school across the street from the church I served in Carlsbad. One afternoon, she came to my office in tears. In an English class, after making the same spelling error twice, she was forced to stand on her desk and spell the word out loud, over and over. She was humiliated. Before she finished telling me what happened, I was out the door. I left behind all my normal rational behavior as I stormed into the classroom and lit into that teacher with rage. This wasn't a time for rational debate and cool logic – not when I perceived my child had been hurt.

That's how Shaundra Cunningham sees the Canaanite woman whose only focus in on her daughter. And remember that African American colleague of mine from Oakland who said of the woman, "That's my mamma."

Let me return to Ms. Cunningham's sermon:

This really wasn't about Jesus per se; it was about the woman's daughter, and indeed all of our daughters who give meaning to life and make us want to keep pushing even when we get rejected. Believe me, [she said] those rejections are real, and they will happen. Will we have the clarity of mind and purpose to remember our mission? Remember your daughter at all costs, remember the main thing.

I personally had some pretty high expectations for President Obama and for his promise of a new day. It is with great disappointment that I have seen Israel increase the oppression of Palestinians and the US, other than occasional mild rebukes, stand by and do nothing. It is with great sadness I have watched this administration dramatically expand the war in Afghanistan. It would be easy to turn away and say, "Yeah, it's always the same in politics." But I have to remember the persistence of the Canaanite woman.

It would be easy to say, "I've done all I can do to live out my faith in terms of stopping torture, helping victims of genocide in Darfur, eliminating nuclear weapons, and welcoming immigrants into our midst instead of scape-goating them." It would be easy to say, "I give up in terms of hoping for any compassionate response to homelessness in Long Beach." But I have got to remember the words of Shaundra Cunningham's sermon, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." I've got to remember how the Canaanite woman responded to rejection.

So once again, this particular gospel story has something new and profound to teach me.

Let me end with the words Shaundra Cunningham used to end her sermon:

I am convinced the gospel writer didn't tell us the whole story. After we get Jesus to heal our daughter, then and only then, can we go back and give Jesus a piece of our mind. Not out of bitterness or anger, but inspired by the holy of holies and all those who have shaped us into who we are, we can write another clause into this passage. We go back and have a little talk with Jesus and tell him 'I played your game but now that my daughter is healed, let's get a few things straight about this dog business.'

Amen.