

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

August 20, 2023

Fully Human

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the words of the three ecumenical creeds (which we confess), we understand Jesus to be fully God and fully human. This is made most clear in the creed we use the least, the Athanasian creed. In that confession of faith we include this clause: “For this is the true faith that we believe and confess: That our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, is both God and man. He is God, begotten before all worlds from the being of the Father, and he is man, born in the world from the being of his mother— existing fully as God, and fully as man with a rational soul and a human body; equal to the Father in divinity, subordinate to the Father in humanity.”¹

Now, let's not go too far into the weeds of Christology. Oceans of ink have been spilled over the generations arguing about Christ's nature and what it means to be both divine and human, both unlimited and limited. Ultimately, true understanding of Christ's nature belongs in the same theological realm as the bread and wine becoming the body and blood of Christ, that is, they are both mysteries of faith. But we do need to go far enough into the weeds of this discussion to grapple with our Gospel text for today.

It is easy to see Christ's divine nature on display in scripture, but it can be harder to see Christ as human too. The Gospels go on at length about the power Jesus wields. Power that can still a storm, heal the broken and hurting, even raise the dead back to life. And when we aren't hearing accounts of these miracles, the Gospels are showing Jesus to be a powerful preacher and a wise teacher. Amidst all of that divinity, it can be difficult to find expressions of Christ's humanity too!

¹https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Athanasian_Creed_Evangelical_Lutheran_Worship.pdf

Those examples are there if we look for them though! When Jesus cleanses the Temple² he is expressing zeal, outrage, even anger...now there's something humanity can relate too! We also read in multiples places that Jesus had the same human needs as the rest of us: food and drink, clothing and shelter, rest and renewal. Jesus seems to experience fear and anxiety in the garden of Gethsemane before his Passion; pleading to be spared the Cross. And there are a handful of others too. But then there's our text for today, which provides perhaps the most blatant example of Christ's humanity.

Why is this a blatant example of Christ's humanity? He changes! That is, after all, not something God ever really does. We are told repeatedly in Scripture in a variety of ways that God is "the same yesterday, today, and forever."³ God is the "alpha and omega."⁴ God was before all else and God will be when all else ends. God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. All of this is to say, God does not change because God does not need to, for God encompasses all of Creation. Or perhaps its more accurate to say that concepts like change or stasis are irrelevant when it comes to God.

But here in this text, in this short little interaction between Jesus and an unidentified Canaanite woman, Jesus changes! Specifically, he changes his mind on who the Good News is for. And what a powerful and beautiful thing for him to do! What a powerful and beautiful thing for him to show us how to do!

We likely need a little more context to truly appreciate what's going on here. It is important to note that all of this occurs in the region of Tyre and Sidon and that the woman is a Canaanite. Tyre and Sidon were enemies of Israel for quite some time. And it is from those regions that Queen Jezebel came. The Queen who opposed and persecuted the great prophet Elijah at every opportunity.

So, one strike against this woman, she lives in a foreign land. And there's another one of course, she's a woman! Then there's the fact that she is a

² Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-16; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-17 (NRSVUE)

³ Hebrews 13:8

⁴ Revelation 1:8, 1:11, 21:6, 22:13

Canaanite. This is the only reference to Canaanites in the New Testament (the parallel in Mark calls her a Syro-Phoenician woman⁵), and when the text uses such an unusual and unique label, we should pay attention to it. Identifying her as a Canaanite means she not only lives in this foreign land, but she is a foreigner herself. She is not a part of the Jewish diaspora or anything like that. Even the Samaritan woman in John 4 had much the same faith as the Jews, but this Canaanite woman shares next to nothing with Jesus and the disciples.

And Jesus' response to her reflects all of these strikes against her. Frankly, Jesus comes across as bigoted in this text. The woman approaches him as many before had too, loudly crying out for help. And how does Jesus respond? First he ignores her, then he argues with her, and finally he insults her! And not only does he insult this foreign woman, he does so while expressing a disheartening sentiment... that God was only interested in "the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

But this Canaanite woman...wow...she is determined. Desperation for her daughter drives her to talk back, something a foreign woman should not be doing to a famous Rabbi. Her response calls Jesus out. She uses his insult towards her to say to Jesus what Jesus had said about others...that the lowly and ostracized deserve love, grace, and care too. One can almost imagine a lightbulb going off over Christ's head!

And so Jesus changes his mind about who the Gospel is for. And thanks be to God for that, since all of us here today would fall under the "dogs" category in this exchange. And in changing his mind Jesus shows his humanity...he too needs to learn and grow (though perhaps he has a little less of this to do than the rest of us). Now, I firmly believe that God intended the Gospel for all people all along; but perhaps that was something the fully human Jesus needed to learn from this woman.

Why would that be needful? Who knows! But, if nothing else, it provides an example for us followers of the Way. If we can see Jesus changing a bigoted opinion to a loving and gracious one, perhaps that should mean something for us too. So who is the Canaanite woman in your life? Who could you

⁵ Mark 7:24-30

casually ignore, or argue with, or easily insult? Who do you think of as not “good enough”? And can you follow the example Christ sets? Can you endeavor to expand your expectation of who the Gospel is for too?

In the end, we learn from this encounter that if the Gospel is not good news for **everyone** then it's not really the Gospel! This is a close parallel to another teaching you're heard from this pulpit before: either we proclaim that God's grace is for everyone or we do not truly know what God's grace is. God's love and grace...and the good news of that love and grace...IS FOR ALL. Amen.