

8.16.20 Where Do You Turn When You're Despairing? Matthew 15.21-28
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In the past two decades, deaths of despair from suicide, drug overdose, and alcoholism have risen dramatically in the United States, and now claim hundreds of thousands of American lives every year—and they're still rising. The book *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* by Angus Deaton and Anne Case discusses the reasons for the dramatic rise of deaths of despair especially among working-class white Americans. Sadly, Wednesday evening at our Vespers service, Sharon Kautz received a text message from a friend sharing that a relative had died from suicide.

I received an email from someone in our church who saw my sermon title and she wrote me the following: "Feelings of despair are so powerful in the world we are in right now; despair is loud and visible. Despair may start with fear and confusion and a deep longing to go back to "before the pandemic," if we can even remember that time. Everyone is experiencing the pandemic at some level so it isn't like you can talk with someone who is outside of it and can be objective. You also cannot just "talk with someone," unless they're your immediate family you're living with, or 6 feet apart so the simplicity of having a conversation is gone, and that has created an incredibly hard world. Natural responses when someone is hurting such as talking, a hand on a shoulder, listening, a hug, praying with them, being with them and not saying anything at all - the absence of those responses only deepens the despair. My last hug was in early March. People have died of COVID with a nurse holding a phone as their loved one talked to them. There is so much uncertainty, so many unknowns, so many knowns taken away. The world is a mess and I believe it's going to be very hard for quite some time before things start to get better, and there is healing, and any sense of "normalcy" again." I appreciated her honest and insightful sharing. Where do we turn when we're despairing and when there is good reason to despair? Today's Gospel passage is a story of a woman who is despairing, and I want to share how she responded and what we can learn from her.

The context for the scripture from the Gospel of Matthew is that Jesus leaves his home area of Galilee where people shared his nationality and Jewish religious tradition. His latest attempts among them have been greeted by opposition from leaders and

misunderstanding from his disciples. Jesus must be a little frustrated. Perhaps it isn't surprising that he decides to get out of town and take a road trip. He heads northwest from Galilee for the region of Tyre, named for the large port city located on the Mediterranean coast about 50 miles south of Beirut in Lebanon. (Tyre was originally an island. It became a peninsula when Alexander the Great constructed a half mile ramp from the mainland 322 years before Christ was born) So Jesus did what a lot of people are doing on the Cape this weekend, he left home and went to the sea shore to *"get away from it all."* However, Jesus can rarely get away. Listen to the Gospel:

"21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 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."*** 23 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."* 24 He answered, ***"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."*** 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, ***"Lord, help me."*** 26 He answered, ***"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."*** 27 She said, ***"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."*** 28 Then Jesus answered her, ***"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."*** And her daughter was healed instantly."

The scripture begins, *"Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon."* He left the place where people from his own faith community sought to test and trap him, and he went away. I don't blame him. Jesus heads to the border of Tyre and Sidon, where the people are of a different nationality and a different religion than he is. Jesus is leaving the place where we would think people would be the most receptive to his mission and going where we wouldn't expect people to care about what Jesus has to say or offer. Jesus walked toward the border.

Jill and I walk together a lot. You experience the world in a different way when you're walking than if you're traveling much faster on a bike or a motorcycle or if you're in a car. Walking allows you to hear the birds and to feel the lay of the land with your feet. You can stop and have conversations with people that don't happen if you're moving quickly. If all we knew about Jesus were his walking habits, it would be significant. Jesus is a border walker. If you want to find Jesus, you will find him walking

along the borders. Borders are places where people either come together or split apart, join or divide. The Apostle Paul, who knew – as we’re trying to know – the spirit of Jesus, thought Jesus walked at least three borders. Paul says in Galatians 3:28, *“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”* Paul mentions several of the most significant borders that divide and separate people – ethnicity, power, economic status, and gender. These are borders where there is often division, fear, and even violence. Spiritually speaking, however, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, these dividing places can become meeting places. Communion, communication, and even friendship can replace separation, suspicion, and fear. Despair can give way to faith, hope, and healing. This was something, according to Matthew, that even Jesus needed to learn.

Jesus walks to the northwest, toward Tyre and Sidon and a Canaanite woman from that region appears seemingly out of nowhere – she is the catalyst for what happens. The woman came out and she’s also crying out as she’s coming forward. She is despairing yet assertive and insightful. She knows who Jesus is. You may wonder how this woman had heard of Jesus in the first place. **Mark 3:8-10** says that people *“came from all Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, beyond the Jordan, and the region around Tyre and Sidon. He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him; for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him.”* The woman in today’s story may have heard someone from her region talking about what they heard and saw Jesus do.

The urgency and intensity of the woman’s despair is evident in that she falls at Jesus’ feet and begs him to help her daughter. There are a lot of parents and grandparents who can relate to this woman’s situation. There is nothing harder for a parent or grandparent than a child who’s in trouble, who’s in need, and feeling powerless to change the situation. **Where do you turn when you are despairing and feeling powerless or hopeless?** This woman turns to Jesus. Falling at the feet of Jesus and begging is both a last resort and a source of hope. I met with parents early this past week who were despairing over their adult son, yet with prayer, the love of his parents, and a significant friend, his mother believes God is at work turning that situation around.

In Matthew's description of this encounter the woman confronts Jesus with a combination of titles calling him at first, "**Lord, Son of David.**" This is a complete and accurate designation for Jesus. He is **the Lord** and therefore meant for **everyone**. He is also **the Son of David**, a Jew, he is **a particular man** from a particular people with a distinctive heritage and traditions. Jesus is universal and yet particular.

There is also a universal quality to each of us. We're connected to God and all human beings and to all life that God sustains. We're also particular. We're a unique personality, a member of specific ethnic group or groups. It's this universal-particular paradox of each person that the Canaanite woman sees in Jesus. She also sees that Jesus' mission is to let the mercy of God flow freely and widely. Despairing, she comes to Jesus begging for mercy, but not for herself. She wants this mercy to flow not for herself, but for the daughter she loves. Without doubt this is Jesus' type of woman.

But as Matthew describes the scene, it seems like Jesus is having a problem **because he did not answer her at all. Did this surprise you?** However we might respond to this woman's passionate and legitimate appeal, it evokes no response at all from Jesus. **He doesn't even speak to her or acknowledge her presence.** This is hard for us to understand. This doesn't fit with our picture of a loving Savior, of a kind and gentle Jesus who always wants to help. What is going on here? Why doesn't Jesus respond to this pleading woman who displays so many of the qualities he values?

The way Matthew presents the disciples, their function is almost always to miss the point so that we may get it. The disciples think the woman is the problem. They think the fact that she is making a scene is what's bothering Jesus. They think this is simply the latest episode in the centuries old dilemma: crying, despairing women and awkward, uncomfortable men who don't know how to respond. However, the problem is not with the woman. Jesus' lack of response has nothing to do with her crying, shouting, and pleading. There is nothing wrong with this woman. The problem lies elsewhere.

The Gospel of Matthew presents Jesus, at first, as perceiving his mission to be not on the border, but within the boundaries. He belongs to Israel and came to gather the members of that house who had strayed from God. Jesus in this story in Matthew's Gospel is refusing to speak to this woman because she is not a Jew. In **Matthew 10:5-6**, Jesus sends out the disciples *"with the following instructions: 'Go nowhere among*

*the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but **go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.***” Matthew presents Jesus as coming from and within Judaism to the Jewish people, however, because of the resistance he meets from some within his own tradition and the faith he is greeted with from many outside, his vision grows to include all people. **In Matthew’s Gospel, this encounter with the Canaanite woman is a key part of opening Jesus’ mission to non-Jews.**

This woman is not going to be easily put off, **she has perseverance.** Jesus says, **(Matthew 15:24), “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”** Even Jesus’ declaration of his exclusive Jewish identity and mission didn’t keep her from coming forward. She addresses him plainly with a clear need. There is no flattery, no bargaining, no argument. Only pure vulnerability from the despair she feels for her daughter. She kneels at his feet and says simply, **“Lord, help me!”** This sounds very similar to what Peter cried out in the previous chapter when he began to sink in the waves (Matthew 14:30) when he said, **“Lord, save me!”**

Even in her despair, notice how savvy this woman is –after she addressed him the first time as, **“Lord, Son of David,”** the next two times she drops the title **“Son of David.”** She is a smart woman and she instantly understands that there is no advantage in reminding Jesus that he is a Jew when she is not. It’s precisely because he is a Jew and she is not that he’s ignoring her. Jesus has been stressing his Jewishness at the expense of his wider humanity. Jesus answers, **“It is 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.”** Dogs were not allowed in a Jewish home. To feed dogs with **“the bread of the children,”** a Jewish person would have to take the bread off the table, walk to the door, open it, and throw it outside. The dogs were always outside the house. But in Gentile houses the dogs were allowed inside. If they wanted to feed the dogs with the **“bread of the children,”** Gentiles didn’t have to go outside the house. All they had to do was reach down with the leftovers to where the dogs were waiting.

Jesus told the Canaanite woman that to feed her he had to take the bread that was inside the house and throw it outside the house. She was an outsider and what he has belongs to insiders. She says, **“Yes, Lord.”** She agrees that the food belongs to the children, or in more theological language, that salvation comes from the Jews. But she

continues her emphasis on Jesus' universal mission by calling him, "*Lord*," the one meant for everyone. When Jesus lives within that identity, she is not outside the house. She is inside the house and eager for any "food" that Jesus has to offer. She basically is saying, "*Lord, I'm already in the house, just notice me.*"

This Canaanite woman turns to Jesus, she turns to faith, and she turns to perseverance and she wins Jesus over and he says, "***Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.***" And her daughter was healed instantly." This story lifts up the power of perseverance and the importance of having a persistent faith that is not easily discouraged when we're despairing. What would have happened if the woman just sulked away when Jesus refused to speak with her? When it comes to spiritual growth, the ways of God, or making our way out of the valley of despair there is little that comes easily. Spiritual growth, like all growth, comes through effort, discipline, initiative, and perseverance. The powers of compassion and the flow of the Lord's mercy are released by great faith that is not easily defeated or discouraged.

During his life Jesus was amazed by two things unbelief and faith. In Mark 6:1-6 Jesus was teaching in his hometown synagogue and they (Mark 6:3) "took offense at him," and (verse 6), "*he was **amazed** at their unbelief.*" **Luke 7:9**, is at the end of an encounter Jesus has with a Roman centurion who came to him and asked Jesus just to give the word to heal his slave who was ill. It says, "When Jesus heard this he was **amazed** at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "*I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.*" Even Jesus is often surprised that he finds faith where he wouldn't necessarily expect to find it – in a persistent Canaanite woman or a Roman centurion, and not in some members of his own synagogue, town, or faith tradition.

As followers of Jesus we are to be border walkers like the Canaanite woman and Jesus, we're to be open to having encounters that enlarge our faith and understanding. While we walk the borders, we can be on the lookout for those who are despairing. Jesus traveled in the company of his disciples and we also can realize anew or for the first time especially the value of being in community with others to whom we can turn to when we're despairing. May we all keep turning to faith, Jesus, and perseverance each day knowing that is the path to moving through despair to hope and healing.

Prayer: Loving God, I pray you will bless all those who may be despairing today. Help us to know we're not alone, that we can turn to Jesus and to your people for help, comfort, challenge, and wisdom. Grant us faith and trust to know that you are real and you love us and we don't have to fight our spiritual battles alone or merely in our own strength. We ask this in Christ's powerful name, Amen

*May the strength of the wind and
the light of the sun,
The softness of the rain and
the mystery of the moon
Reach you and fill you.
May beauty delight you and
happiness uplift you,
May wonder fulfill you and
love surround you.
May your step be steady and
your arm be strong.
May your heart be peaceful and
your word be true.
May you seek to learn,
may you learn to live,
May you live to love, and
may you love ~ always.*

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Where do you turn and what do you do when you are despairing and feeling powerless or hopeless? Are there things you do that are helpful when you find yourself in a difficult place emotionally?
2. What does Jesus practice of being a “border walker” and finding receptivity among non-Jews like the Canaanite woman or a Roman centurion tell us about how we should approach people who may be different than us in several respects?
3. How would you say Galatians 3:28 should influence where we place our focus in defining who we are and our connection with other people?
4. Were you surprised by Jesus’ initial response to the Canaanite woman – ignoring her and not even acknowledging her presence? How is this Gospel story an example of the importance of reading a passage in its context in the Bible?
5. What do you find admirable about the Canaanite woman? What qualities does she demonstrate that we’d be wise to emulate?
6. When we or someone we know is despairing, how can turning to Jesus, faith, and perseverance make a positive difference?