



**LIVING GOD
RENEW AND
TRANSFORM US**

World Communion of Reformed Churches

Called to communion, committed to justice

General Council Bible Study

The Canaanite

Matthew 15:21-28

Elsa Tamez

In this Bible study I will use a literary resource that will make the narration advance through the use of meaningful segments. I will use the chorus as in Greek tragedy to accompany the narration together with the public, and this will give it a clear structure. By this means I am calling the attention to the most fundamental aspects in this story, read and heard so many times.

Then he...

Who?

Jesus the Nazarene, David's son, the one that is more than a shaman when he cures the sick.

The one who came to reform his people

The one who questions the traditions threatening human life

The self-critical one

The one persecuted by the Jewish authorities

The one closer to God

The human face of God

After having left

Where from?

From Genesaret

From a place considered clean by tradition (14.34),

From the discussions with the experts of the law,

Discussions about the clean and the unclean

With the people coming from the great city of Jerusalem

With people who felt uneasy about Jesus' irreverent attitudes.

He left (*anaxoreō*)

He fled, escaped, went away,

According to the dictionary of semantic domain, *anaxoreō* implies a distant place

In 14:13 the same Greek verb is used when Jesus goes by himself somewhere after hearing that John the Baptist had been killed.

In Mark, when Jesus goes to Tyre he does not want anyone to know about it. He wants to rest.

Why?

We do not know why he left to a far-off place. Probably, he wanted to go away from those who did not understand his ministry. Perhaps he was simply tired after working so hard for the people in need.

Or perhaps Matthew wants to tell something important to the readers.

We do not know, we only know that he left.

Where to?

To the regions of Tyre and Sidon

To an unclean place

To Greek cities hostile to Galilee,

To rich and important cities that take advantage of the agricultural goods from the farming region of Galilee.

And look! (*idou*)

"Look," "Here she is." A discourse marker asking the reader to pay special attention.

A woman

A woman appears in the narration, a human being that does not count among the males in that epoch. A woman discriminated against, a lone woman

A nameless woman called by her nationality

A Canaanite woman,

The Canaanites, a despised ethnic group

Canaanite, a deliberately archaic name. The Phoenicians had been called Canaanites before the Hebrew occupation of their land.

Matthew wants to bring to the readers' minds the echos of idolater and unclean inhabitants

That woman, with no name, considered as unclean and as an idolater,

She came out

Where from?

From the distant places of Tyre and Sidon. Places that were unclean among Jesus' contemporaries.

She came out from a region that was hostile to the Jews.

From a home where there was anguish and sadness

She cried out

She cried out of despair, a heartbreaking cry coming deep inside from her.

A cry that the insensitive people do not want to hear.

A cry that disturbs the people's consciousness because it makes them uncomfortable.

A cry that resembles the howling of a wounded animal.

She constantly cried out

What did she cry?

Have mercy on me!

An anguished cry coming from her heart.

Have mercy on me. Stop walking, turn around!

Here I am. I am not invisible. My cry makes me noticeable. I am running towards you. Look at me!

Mercy (*eleēson*). The definition of God, kindness, solidarity with people in need. The movement of the entrails, previous to mercy.

Kyrie eleison (Chorus singing)

She was crying out.

To whom?

To the Lord.

Kyrios, the one with power to heal.

The one with no silver or gold like *kyrios* Caesar.

The one with authority before the powers of this world and the demons of this world.

The one who has no slaves but friends,

The one who sympathizes with the needy.

To whom?

To the son of David.

The one who was a shepherd before being a king.

To the small one who defeated the giant Goliath with a small stone.

David, the utopia of the people from Judaea in their yearning for a time when they would not be subject to any empire.

The David who abused his power as a king, sinned and asked to be forgiven.

The woman, what did she want?

She wanted Jesus to heal her daughter.

“My daughter is sick. My daughter is demon-possessed. My daughter is suffering terribly!”

Her daughter was no longer a person. The demon had robbed the Canaanite woman of the fruit of her womb.

“My house is in shadows. Cast out the demon possessing my daughter!”

Heal her!

A Demon?

Yes, an evil spirit possessing her, a perverse power getting inside her daughter and not letting her be herself.

An evil blinding her mind, impoverishing her spirit, taking hold of her body. A demon who deprives her of her woman's humanity.

What did Jesus do? What did he tell her?

He did not answer. He said not a word. He did not turn around to see her either. He kept walking.

Like the priest and the Levite passing by the wounded man from Jericho in Luke 10.25-37.

Like many people insensitive to the pain of other cultures, Jesus also turned his back on her.

He went by as if he did not care about the woman's suffering.

He did not pay attention to her. Jesus, from whom we would have never expected such attitude, paid no attention to the woman in need of his compassion.

Why?

Because she was a pagan. She did not belong to his culture. She was different.

He felt in the trap of tradition.

Because the cultural habit was stronger than the other's pain. The pain of the different one, of the Canaanite.

Oh, no!

But just because:

He did not want to get engaged in another argument.

He was sick and tired of going against the tide.

It made him remember the hostilities between the two peoples.

Tire and Sidon were cities that considered themselves superior to the country folk of Galilee.

He did not feel like it. He was tired. There were many sick people among his own people. No more. That was it!

He was a human being, like any other Jew.

Or perhaps because Matthew wants to tell something important to his readers.

The disciples

Where were they? What did they say? What did they do?

They were walking with Jesus; they heard the heartbreaking cries of the woman. The woman that was following them, begging. The Canaanite, the person that was different.

They did not want to hear the disconcerting cries of the anonymous woman who was running like crazy.

They want to cover their ears. They do not want to see nor hear the different other.

She disturbs them, she bothers them; she makes them embarrassed.

They do not want the people to look at them because of the Canaanite.

They want her to leave, not to follow them, not to bother them. They want her to vanish, not to exist.

So that women do not bother them with home issues!

So that women do not disturb men or God!

So that the different ones get assimilated to the others!

So that women keep silent, so that there are no different people!

Send her away (Απόλυσον), they said.

Send her away, tell her to go far away, tell her to leave

Send her away (Απόλυσον), they said.

Set her free, cast the demon out her, listen to her ...

Apoluō, ambiguous Greek word that means either to send someone away so that he/she leaves or set him/her free.

Jesus, listen to her, set her free so that she leaves. So that she does not disturb us any more.

She cries behind them.

She wants something; she insists on being heard, on being seen.

She insists with her presence and her voice:

My daughter suffers! I suffer! I am not leaving until you respond!

And she stays there, after them, insisting, crying and asking for mercy. She wants to be present like many invisible women and men, considered non-persons for belonging to stigmatized genders or ethnic groups.

She is the Canaanite, the idolatrous native,

The person uprooted after the conquest of Canaan, of America, of Asia, of Africa.

But they do not want to listen:

“Send her away, because she is crying after us.”

In response, Jesus said

What did he say?

God has not sent me to save pagans, the non-Jewish, those not belonging to the people of God.

Who were you sent to save?

God has only sent me to help the people of Israel

Why save them only?

Because they are in a bad way, they need me, they look like sheep without a shepherd.

They have no one to guide them on the ways of justice. Their religious leaders oppress my people. The experts in the law divert them rather than help them, and make them obey the rules that not even they can follow. The rich think only of their

riches, they do not pity the poor, the sick and the marginalized. The temple has become a cave of thieves.

I must save my people. My people need me.

The others have their own gods. Let them ask them.

And the disciples?

They did not say anything. They did not contradict him. They kept thinking.

They had no time to react.

She came before. She ran and kneeled before him.

Proskeunei. To kneel. To kneel in attitude of reverence and plea at the same time.

What?

She kneeled before him. She bowed and begged insistently. "Please Lord, help me!"

Why did she kneel before him? She was not Jewish. She had her own religion.

She had her own religion, but she was living among the Israelites because she was a Canaanite. She had heard a lot about Jesus as a healer, as a Saviour, as the one who pities the poor and the needy. Why not help her also?

In fact, she called him Lord, not as a mere title. She recognized his lordship. He can heal, she must have thought. He is the Lord, and I have faith in God.

Who told her about him? Where did she hear that he cast out demons? Jesus' fame was spread in many places of Palestine and even out of the Jewish territory.

She must have thought that by getting closer to him and daring to talk to him, by begging him, he would take pity on her and her daughter. I have to insist. I have to be inopportune. My daughter is a human being that deserves being restored.

What did he say?

He refused to save her daughter. He said something nasty. He called her "dog".

"Dog" was a serious insult used by the Jews of that epoch to refer to pagans. The little dog was an unclean animal. Jesus uses the diminutive (*kunariov*) to refer to the domesticated little dogs living in a house. In Philippians 3:2 Paul, who was a Jew, ironically used the term "dog" (*kyōn*) without diminutive,

meaning wild dogs, to refer to the group of Jews demanding the circumcision of the Gentiles. That is, he used the insult in return.

Jesus told her: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their little dogs."

This was a very cultural reaction on the part of the Jews to refer to the Gentiles. What Jesus told his disciples, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." And he told the Canaanite woman in a derisive way: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their little dogs."

We, as readers, get surprised. How can Jesus react in such a negative and selfish way? We did not expect this from him. Chiefly, after the discussion he had with the religious leaders of his people, who criticized him for not washing his hands, for not following the rules of cleanliness and impurity. Here Jesus reacts like them. Or, perhaps, he reacts like this just because of such a discussion where it is exactly demonstrated how far from God are their religious leaders, tied to their traditions and diverting their people's attention from what was truly important. Jesus had to reform the leaders out of compassion for his people.

But what about the rest, and what about the women, the non-Jewish women in need? They, who also had faith in him, who wanted to eat bread because they were not satisfied with the bread of their own bakery. Were they left out?

In fact, this answer by Jesus was surprising, but the Canaanite woman's answer caused more surprise and admiration. Jesus did not expect it.

What did she say?

The Canaanite woman answered by saying:

"Yes, Lord. But even the little dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

The Canaanite recognizes the Jews' privileged position. They are the lords who are given the bread. She recognizes that the pagans have a secondary role in the history of salvation. She also recognizes Jesus' lordship because she calls him Lord. But at the same time she recognizes that those from outside, the pagans, can also eat the food falling from the table. They, the Gentiles, live in the house, in the village created by God, and they are God's creatures. Why not eat from the same blessings that God has for his people?

The Canaanite woman reasons differently from the Syrophenician woman appearing in Mark.

Why?

The Gospel according to Mark was written before the gospel of Matthew. The Gospel according to Matthew was written about 15 years later; the temple no longer existed for it had been destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. The Pharisees unified Judaism in defense for survival. Jesus' followers, who believed he was the Messiah, had been expelled from the synagogue and they were seen as people who did not preserve their traditions. Matthew, probably written by a scribe follower of Jesus, asserts in his Gospel that Jesus' followers are also Abraham's descendants and that they follow the traditions reread in the light of the Messiah, that is Jesus. Therefore, Judaism, a wide and flexible current before the destruction of the temple, was later narrowed to a trend led by the Phrisees. Matthew wants to show that they are also Jews in their own right. That makes the Canaanite woman recognize the Jews as the lords, the owners of bread. The Syrophoenician woman in Matthew is very different. She belongs to the Greek culture; she has a higher social class. She is not called Cannanite and she preserves her culture and religion. The Syrophoenician woman claims the crumbs for the gentiles, even for those who still preserve their non-Jewish faith. To the answer of the Syrophoenician woman Jesus remarks in Mark, "For such a reply (for your *logos*) your daughter is healed." Matthew however, presents her from the beginning as a pagan believer, with great faith.

How did Jesus react before the Canaanite woman's answer?

He was deeply impressed. He did not expect such answer.

In a very intelligent way she uses Jesus' discourse refusing to heal her daughter and changes it. She also extends it to cover the non-Jews as well (the little dogs eat the lords' crumbs, the crumbs falling from their table). She changes Jesus' derisive phrasing and transforms it into an intimate scene inside a home where there is room for everybody. It is not a question of taking something from someone to give it to somebody else, but of everybody eating at the same time, although some with greater privilege for being Jews. Jesus says it is not right to take away from the children what belongs to them and toss it to the little dogs, to whom it does not belong; to toss it means that they are outside; that is, that those outside are depriving the people inside from their right. But she imagines and describes a different scene. She puts the little dogs inside the house, together with the owners of the bread and both groups are eating at the same time, for the children can share the bread and they can all eat it at the same time. There can be enough bread of life for everyone.

The Canaanite woman opens Jesus' eyes and makes him understand that healing her daughter does not change his mission; that it is not a question of putting some people aside to take care of the others. He is just widening his mission, because everyone is God's creature.

You have great faith!

You have great faith! (like an echo)

Jesus surprised, moved and probably grateful tells her, “Woman you have great faith!” or “What great trust you have in God.”

It is true, she had faith; she put trust in God. She knew that she had to persevere, that Jesus had to change his vision, that the marginalized of other peoples could also be agreeable in the eyes of God and blessed.

She insisted, knelt, begged. She made him reason by her discourse.

How interesting that it was not the compassion and tenderness always shown by Jesus towards the other’s suffering, but the arguments of the woman, that impacted him and made him change his mind. This is very important; Jesus the Messiah, the Lord, can change his opinion. If he can do that everybody can change their frames of mind. Jesus refused three times before her plea. Firstly he did not say a single word in response to her cry asking for mercy. (v. 23); secondly, he said no to his disciples, the intercessors of suffering, who just wanted her to leave. He tells them I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel (v. 24) and thirdly, he denies it to her, personally, when she begs on her knees. “It is not right to take their childrens’ bread and toss it to the little dogs.” But she made him change his mind. From that moment on Jesus is opened to the non-Jews. The same chapter ends with the multiplication of bread in the same Galilee. There they share seven loaves of bread and some fish to feed a great crowd, more than 4,000 people. Once the crowd was satisfied there are seven other baskets left. In Hebrew numerology, number seven means full, integral. There were not 12 more baskets in reference to the 12 tribes of Israel, but seven, the perfect number including the Gentiles. Number four means the four cardinal points in reference to the universe. This makes it clear that Matthew is telling the readers that Jesus came to renew not only the Jews but also the Gentiles.

Do as you wish

Do as you wish (like an echo)

At the end it was done the way she wanted. She wanted her daughter to come back to life, to cast the demon out of her, of her house, and she succeeded. It was not easy for her. Her voice, her tears, her kneeling and her clear and quick mind made possible what was most precious to her. Her daughter was healed by Jesus. She wanted it, and she got it.

From that moment on the Canaanite woman’s daughter was healed.

The Canaanite woman’s daughter was healed (like an echo)

This story is not meant as a spectacular miracle. It was a healing done at a distance. That is why the story is not told as a miracle. The story is intended to show something else, something that will change the course of Jesus' ministry. The center of the story is the argumentation, the dialogue between him, the Messiah of Galilee and the woman, a Canaanite with a bright mind. She knows what she wants, she knows who she is, and achieves what she wants. She is not looking for selfish whims, but for a life and death issue. Jesus said: "Your request is granted." And it was done as she wished. In the house of that mother and daughter, of the different ones, light shone again.

Light shone again. (strong and assertive)

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Instructions for the presentation of the Bible study

Letters in **bold type** and no shade: Elsa Tamez

Yellow: a ten-person chorus

Green: explanation that is not part of the text of the narration (a person should be chosen for this)

Purple: a song, with the choir and the whole assembly