



**The “And” of Identity**  
**Matthew 5:21-28**  
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Washington Street UMC  
October 24, 2021

Over the past two month’s we’ve been looking at an invitation to faithfulness that borrows the directive from improv to say “Yes, and ...” ... Can you say that with me? “Yes ... and ....” We’ve been invited to accept the reality of that which is, and to move the story forward to a more faithful, more peaceful, more graceful existence.

Throughout the Biblical text, we see God embrace the “yes, and ...” mentality to lead us, to redeem us, and to sustain us in the reconciliation and restoration of creation. This is the work of God, and as such, it is the work we are called to as God’s Church.

As we conclude this worship series, we are looking this morning at the “yes, and” of identity.

If someone asked you, who are you?, how would you respond? How would you define yourself? What would you say to describe your identity?

We spend an inordinate amount of time trying to define ourselves and to define each other. I’m not sure if that’s an American thing or a global thing, but we do our best to put descriptors on each other. We like to use words to describe identity, words like “democrat” and “republican,” “tall” and “short,” “rich” and “poor,” “housed” and “homeless,” “resident” and “immigrant,” “Christian” and “unchristian,” “married” and “single,” “black” and “white” ... the list goes on and on.

If we’re being honest, we assign some level of value to each descriptor. There are some words that carry with them power and weight, and some that bring with them judgement and disdain. Much of the weight of these words is inherent bias – we’re trained as children to think certain ways about certain identifiers and we may not even know it.

We often work to ensure that the words that describe us are those that carry positive impressions. It is common in our culture to spend a great deal of time and money ensuring that we are referenced using positive identifiers.

Our scriptural story today is about the weight of identifiers, and how, even the most faithful of us can fall prey to thinking that our visible, genetic, and inherited identities are sufficient for determining our worth.

Jesus had been in the northern region of Israel, around the north end of the Sea of Galilee. He left Galilee and made his way to the district of Tyre and Sidon – two cities along the Mediterranean in modern day Turkey. The region was north of Israel’s land, in what would have been defined as “Gentile

territory.” This was not a place defined as part of Israel, though “A large Jewish population was to be found north of the Galilean border in the political territories of Tyre and Sidon.” It is likely that it was these communities of Jews that would have drawn Jesus to this region. He does indicate in verse 24 that he was sent to the “lost sheep of the House of Israel.” It’s quite possible he has gone to find these Israelites who were living in Gentile territory.

As they are making their way into Gentile land, Matthew tells us that 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.”

Her being defined as a Canaanite, and her being from the Gentile region, are important identifiers. These identifiers help us understand what happens next, but they also provide some much needed depth to the story.

Let’s start with her being a Gentile. In all of his recorded ministry, we only find Jesus interacting with Gentiles twice. Once is with this woman; a second time is just a couple chapters earlier, in Matthew 8, when Jesus healed the servant of a Centurion from Capernaum – another town in Gentile territory.

Not only do we find Jesus sparsely interacting with Gentiles, but conversely, we find Jesus telling the disciples to avoid Gentiles. In Matthew 10, Jesus says directly, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but rather go to the lost sheep of Israel.”

In our story today, Jesus is taking the disciples into Gentile territory, seemingly going against his own instruction.

Along with being defined as a Gentile, we are also told that this woman is a ... well, woman. She’s a woman who has a daughter who is tormented by a demon.

Contextually, we know that women in the first century were seen as property. They were understood to be under the authority of their father until they were married off, at which point they became under the authority of their husband. A woman had few rights on her own in the society at the time. And, while Jesus has shown his willingness to go against cultural norms, advocating on behalf of women, acknowledging the role of women in the faith community, and even to offer grace to women who were expecting harsh punishment, it would have been against the cultural norms for this woman to come out screaming at Jesus, a Jewish man ... a Rabbi.

In a contrasting story, Jesus was on his way to heal the child of Jairus, and a hemorrhaging woman approached Jesus from behind. She came up quietly, trying to touch his cloak without being noticed. This would have been more what one would expect from a woman in the society at that time.

But not this woman, she came out and started shouting. A Gentile woman, shouting at them.

Finally, we’re told this woman is a Canaanite.

As if being a Gentile and a shouting woman weren't already strikes against her, being a Canaanite would have been strike three.

To understand the complications with being a Canaanite, we have to go back – way back.

When the floods receded, Noah had three sons – Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan. In Genesis 9, we're told that Ham saw his father lying naked and that in response, Noah spoke a curse over Canaan. Because of what Ham, his son did, Noah cursed Canaan, his grandson. Genesis 9:25 reads, "Cursed be Canaan, lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers."

Canaan's people, his descendants, are those called the Canaanites. ... According to Genesis 10, the Israelites came from the line of Shem, Ham's older brother. The Canaanites and Israelites all stem from the same family, from Noah's family, only the Canaanites carry a curse of Biblical proportion.

Fast forward to Exodus 23 – the Israelites have been led out of Egypt by Moses, and have been told they will enter the promised land. Yet, as they stand ready to enter the land, they find the land currently occupied. Who lives there? ... You guessed it, the Canaanites. In Exodus 23, we read, "When my angel goes in front of you, and brings you to the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods, or worship them, or follow their practices, but you shall utterly demolish them and break their pillars in pieces." God is inviting the Canaanite demise.

Fast forward again to the book of Joshua; Joshua is the one who will ultimately lead the Israelites into the promised land after Moses leads them in the wilderness. In the stories of Joshua, we find the Canaanites named multiple times, as the Israelites defeat the Canaanites in multiple areas and push them out of the land that they had inhabited since the days following the flood. At the end of Joshua, we're told the Canaanites had almost all of their land taken away as they were forced out of the region that was the promised land.

To say that there is bad blood between the Canaanites and the Israelites is to put the conflict mildly. This family division goes back generations.

Being a Canaanite woman, a gentile, would have given Jesus and the disciples all they needed to know to pass this woman by. And, at first glance, it seems that is exactly what Jesus and the disciples plan to do.

The woman comes out shouting at Jesus, "Have mercy on me, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." *But Jesus did not answer her at all.* The text tells us, Jesus didn't respond. He glanced at her, and kept walking. He was prepared to ignore her.

The disciples chimed in, urging Jesus to send her away because she was still shouting at them. (To be clear, the disciples – leaders in the church – didn't ask for her to be sent away because of her identity a Gentile, a Canaanite, or a woman ... they wanted to send her away because this Gentile Canaanite

woman wouldn't stop shouting at them.) This mother, with a daughter who was tormented by a demon, was ready to follow Jesus as far as she had to to get his attention and his help.

Jesus responded to the disciples – he hasn't spoken yet to the woman – he said to the disciples, "I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." He seems clear in his missional focus.

For the moment, let's take that response at face value. We could argue that Jesus' hesitation to help this woman is only because he is so singularly focused on his missional identity. She is not a member of the lost sheep of the house Israel, and so, Jesus is ready to pass her by.

She catches up to Jesus and falls on her knees before him and says, "Lord, help me."

She's begging him. She's literally begging him to save her daughter.

And Jesus again says "no." He responds to her, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

In preparing for this morning's message, I read through a number of commentaries on this text. I wanted to see what others had to say about Jesus calling this woman a dog. Do we dismiss it as some kind of culturally appropriate term used in the first century when referring to Canaanite Gentile women? Or perhaps just for Gentiles? Or maybe just for women? Is there an out for Jesus calling this woman a dog?

We define Jesus as fully human and fully divine. We call him God incarnate – or God in-fleshed. We often over-deify Jesus, forgetting that for as holy as he may be, Jesus is still a 30-something-year-old man who was raised in the chauvinistic world of first-century Judaism. And, in this moment, he is travelling with a bunch of other men whom he called off of fishing boats. (Not to judge, but I've watched enough *Deadliest Catch* on Discovery Channel to have a stereotype in my mind about fishermen.) Jesus is fully human. Is it possible that in this moment Jesus is showing his full humanity?

He calls her a dog, saying, should I take that which was given for the house of Israel – the children – and throw it to the dogs? ... Dogs, or people like you?

But this woman is a mother who needs help for her daughter. And, for all it seems that she is being judged for, given her identity, she knows the identity of Jesus. She calls him the Son of David. How might this Canaanite woman, a Gentile – not a Jew – know Jesus as the Son of David?

Well, let's consider her background. In Matthew 1, we're given the genealogy of Jesus, beginning with Abraham going all the way through Mary. In that genealogy are listed three Canaanite women: Rahab, Tamar, and Ruth.<sup>ii</sup> This woman's Canaanite blood runs in Jesus's veins. The very blood that runs in Jesus runs in her.

I don't know how she knew Jesus to be the Son of David, and, it's impossible to know given what little the text tells us, but I can't help to think that it is possible that she's on the family tree family for one of

Rahab, Tamar, or Ruth. Is it not possible that this woman, whom Jesus was ready to pass by and ignore even after she cried for help, is in some way a distant relative? At minimum, the both go back to Noah.

Yet, she persists, even after being called a dog, once more saying to him, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

Her persistence and her faith will not succumb to an identity crisis. She won’t let her identity be the reason her daughter doesn’t receive the power of healing she so desperately needs. As the Rev. Dr. Mitzi Smith says, “Perhaps faith engenders persistence or maybe persistence feeds faith. Either way, persistence and faith make a powerful pair.”

At last, Jesus responds in an affirmative way, answering her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

We often try to determine another’s identity to decide ahead of time whether or not they are worth our time. We often try to judge one another by what we can see outwardly, and from our perception, we decide whose identity qualifies them as “good enough.”

And, in a similar way, we often use our own identity to determine whether or not we are “good enough.” We look at our pasts, and our present, and we judge ourselves, as if the qualifiers of our culture hold weight over us.

But this story, this example of God’s expansive love, makes a strong declaration. It is not your identity that determines your faith. It is not your qualifiers that determine whether or not you are capable of receiving the promise of new life. *Yes*, you may be a Gentile and Canaanite woman, someone who is on the outs from the historic church, someone who the society willingly discriminates against, *and* you are still one of God’s created humanity. *And* you can receive new life. *And* you don’t have to lose your identifiers – not your nationality, not your gender identity, not your relationship to the ancient Hebraic law – you are welcome as you are because you are one of God’s created. So have faith, be persistent, and trust that God’s love in its full divinity is greater the brokenness of our humanity. Amen and Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare. *Matthew: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

<sup>ii</sup> Mitzi Smith. *Commentary on Matthew 15: [10-20] 21-28*. workingpreacher.org. Retrieved October 20, 2021.