

Matthew 15:21-28 (NRSV) ~ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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.” 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.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” He answered, “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.” Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was instantly healed.

On February 8, 2017, *The Atlantic Daily*, ran an article by Megan Garber that reported on an unintentional, yet instantaneously successful dubbing of a rally cry for women. Her opening paragraphs paint the scenario:

There are many ways that American culture tells women to be quiet – many ways they are reminded that they would really be so much more pleasing if they would just smile a little more, or talk a little less, or work a little harder to be pliant and agreeable. Women are, in general, extremely attuned to these messages; we have, after all, heard them all our lives.

*And so: When presiding Senate chair Steve Daines, of Montana, interrupted his colleague, Elizabeth Warren, as she was reading the words of Coretta Scott King on the Senate floor on Tuesday Evening—and, then, when Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell intervened to prevent her from finishing the speech—many women, regardless of their politics or place, felt that silencing, viscerally. And when McConnell, later, remarked of Warren, “She was warned. She was given an explanation. **Nevertheless, she persisted,**” many women, regardless of their politics or place, felt it again.*

Within days, there were social media memes, hashtags, newspaper headlines, and millions of t-shirts sporting the now-coined rally-cry, “**Nevertheless, she persisted.**” I had to wonder then if Elizabeth Warren or Mitch McConnell recognized the scriptural accounts that had already illustrated this very point – “**nevertheless, she persisted.**” Today’s scripture text from Matthew’s 15th chapter is just one of those scriptural accounts. And this is a tough story to deal with, especially in a day when we are reminding ourselves and those who will listen– that God’s love is for everyone; that Jesus came seeking and saving the lost...all of the lost!; that the

unconditional love of God knows no boundaries. This passage, on the surface, would have us to believe that Jesus bought into the exclusive culture of his day, that he wanted to be stingy in the imparting of mercy and healing, or that he would only use his power to work miracles on those like him.

So, let me invite you to dig deeper into this account of Jesus' interaction, conversation, and conflict with the Canaanite woman. First, let's take a look at our setting. Matthew tells us that Jesus had left Galilee and gone to the district of Tyre and Sidon, when a Canaanite woman from that region approached him. You might notice that the woman is indigenous to that region, Jesus is not. The Canaanites and Israelites were both under Roman occupation and rule. This woman, seen as unclean by the Jews due to the race and culture of her birth, approaches Jesus shouting in Hebrew terminology, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." Consistent with Jewish practice, this "unclean woman" confesses her sinfulness, names her savior, and seeks the miracle of healing for her tormented daughter. One would have thought she had attended classes at the temple reserved only for male rabbinical students. But even as she shouted in desperation and hope, Jesus did not respond. **Nevertheless, she persisted.**

This woman, so unworthy that her name is not mentioned, must have continued shouting after Jesus, and annoying his disciples for they urged Jesus to send her away. **Nevertheless, she persisted.** And then it is as if Jesus is thinking out loud in order to help the disciples to follow his train of thought. Jesus states, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, *"not my people, not my problem."* **Nevertheless, she persisted.** Undaunted, she knelt before him, pleading for his help. His reply this time hurled a cultural insult, a racial slur - "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Swallowing hard, **nevertheless, she persisted.** And she extended the bounds of what seemed to be limited mercy, love, and willingness to extend his healing power. She said, "Yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." **Nevertheless, she persisted.** At that moment, Jesus became the savior for all nations that he was born to be, as in recognition of the depth of her hope in him, he responded, "Woman great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." **Nevertheless, she persisted.** And her daughter was healed!

This same sort of persistent woman, always unnamed, shows up in several biblical stories. Within Jesus' parables, there is the woman who will not stop looking for her lost coin until it is found. **Nevertheless, she persisted.** And there was a great

celebration. There was another woman who would not quit knocking on the judge's door until she received the answer, the justice that she sought. **Nevertheless, she persisted.** And justice was achieved.

Jesus interacted with determined women as well. One woman who had been bleeding for twelve years reached out and touched the hem of Jesus' garment. She was challenged because she was "unclean" and not supposed to be touching any man. **Nevertheless, she persisted.** And she was healed. Another woman's back was bent for eighteen years. When she pursued Jesus' healing powers, it was the Sabbath, and unlawful for her to ask, or for Jesus to heal. **Nevertheless, she persisted.** And she was healed. There was a widow who only had two coins to her name, but who valued giving generously to the work of God in the world. Although she knew she would have nothing left for herself, **Nevertheless, she persisted.** And in her generosity, she was blessed to be noticed by Jesus.

Even in such a different time and culture, Jesus upheld these women who broke the rules, who were persistent, who reached out when they were supposed to keep their arms at their sides, who gave their last dime, who knocked until the door was finally open. **Nevertheless, they persisted.** **AND**, because **Jesus was faithful in listening** for the needs, the plight, the desperation of these unnamed women, prayers were answered, love extended, healing afforded, and suffering ceased. Jesus is teaching us, in thinking out loud, in listening carefully, and in responding graciously, that careful, heartfelt listening **expands** one's knowledge, scope of care, and circle of influence.

Winston Churchill once said that "Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen." Following Jesus, do we have the courage to speak and to listen? With the example of the Canaanite woman before us, will we persist?

Next Sunday we will have one worship service at 10:00 a.m. here in the sanctuary. (This is your second reminder!) During that service we will have the opportunity to seek prayers for healing for ourselves, our loved ones, and neighbors in every place. I pray that as we continue this journey of confession, naming our Savior, seeking redemption, forgiveness, healing, and grace, that it will be said of us:

Nevertheless, she persisted.

Nevertheless, he persisted.

Nevertheless, they persisted. Nevertheless, we persist!

For, great is our faith in the Almighty who saves. Amen.