

**HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH
SUNDAY, JANUARY 29, 2023**

MATTHEW 15: 21-28

“BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS”

Joseph Kennedy, the father of John, Bobby, & Ted, was a wealthy man. But he was also sometimes a cheapskate. When his sons were still young, he owned a vacation home in Florida. One year he noticed the paint was starting to peel and the house looked bad. But he didn't want to put too much money into the problem. Being only the front side of the house was visible from the street, he decided to have just the front side painted. And to let the paint on the other three sides of the house keep peeling for a few more years! After all, no one saw those sides anyway.....

Fake appearances are not rare. Neither are fake people, unreal folks. Sometimes some testing is needed to see what someone is really like.

In our gospel reading today from Matthew 15, our Lord Jesus Christ tested a woman. She came to Him to ask healing for her daughter who was ill and demon-possessed. The Lord tested her---was her faith real? Or not so real, like Joseph Kennedy's painting of his house?

She passed the test. She was “the real thing” with real faith. Christ healed her daughter and said, “O woman, great is your faith!”.

This woman was very different from most folks seeking help from Jesus---she was not Jewish. St. Matthew says she was “Canaanite”, a term for people who lived then just north of Palestine. For Christ had taken a short side trip into what we now call southern Lebanon, the area near Tyre and Sidon. So this woman, this “Canaanite”, was a Lebanese woman. (Who knows? Maybe she is a distant cousin to some of our Lebanese parishioners?)

During His three years of public ministry, our Lord ministered almost only to Jews. Of course, after His death and resurrection, the Church that He founded was for all people of any nation. But before His death and resurrection, there were only rare exceptions where He ministered to Gentiles.

In the story today, He tested this Gentile woman by at first ignoring her. She asked Him to help her daughter. And Matthew tells us in verse 23---“But He did not answer her a word.” The woman was stubborn and she would not give up. The 12 Disciples got sick of her persistence and we read, also in verse 23---“His disciples begged Jesus, saying, ‘Send her away, for she is

crying after us.”

The Lord did not send her away, but next He speaks harshly to her. It is strange to hear Jesus speaking such harsh words. But He didn't do it to be cruel, but to test her faith. He said to her in verse 26—“It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.”

What is that about? Well, Jews and Gentiles didn't get along well back then (not always so great now either...). In the Middle East back then (and still somewhat now), dogs were looked down on. And so Jews and Gentiles, to show their dislike for each other, would call each other “dogs”. Jesus Christ is using this common harsh term in almost a “symbolic” way---with “dog” meaning Gentile, and “children” meaning Jew. So what He is saying is that it wasn't fair to take the bread of Jews and give it to Gentiles. Why? Because His ministry before His death and resurrection was almost exclusively to Jews. That would totally change later, but not yet.... Any help to a Gentile now was a rare exception. So with these harsh words, He is testing the Lebanese woman—is her faith strong enough that He should make an exception?

She passed the faith test with flying colors! She did that by answering in verse 27—“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.” Do you have a pet dog? Where is your dog at dinner time? Right by your table, just waiting for crumbs to fall! Waiting, eagerly hoping... The woman would be thrilled to get just one crumb from the Lord--the healing of her daughter. Her faith was so strong that she believed one little crumb from God would be enough! Crumbs from the Lord were better than a huge banquet anywhere else! Her faith was *real*, not fake. So the Lord answered her in verse 28---“O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire!” And her little girl was healed on the spot.

The Lord crossed a line that day----the line of separation between Jews and Gentiles. He broke a barrier. And by doing so, it was a clear sign that the Church He would start at Pentecost was not just for Jews---it was for all people. For all who had real faith in Him.....nationality didn't matter.

Some people think some things are *so* important....things God doesn't care about at all! Some people think skin color is of overwhelming importance—God doesn't care about it at all. Some people think language or what accent someone has are very important---God doesn't care about that at all. Some people think race is real important. Not God, it doesn't matter a bit to Him. People speak of there being several different races----white, brown, black, yellow. But God just made one race, the human race. As St.

Paul said in Acts 17:26---“God made *from one* every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth.” God only knows of one race---the human race.

And Christ started only one Church----so obviously it has to be for all people. And so congregations should be for all people, regardless of nationality, language, or skin color. Thank God, here at St. Matthew’s we have at least a fair amount of varieties of people. And we all get along just fine, enjoying the variety and the differences of background, instead of getting up tight about it.

You know that I am always encouraging you to invite people to visit our church and become part of our parish family---non-Christians, non-Orthodox Christians, and Orthodox who aren’t attending some other Orthodox parish. Invite them all----and don’t set up any barriers when you do so. Don’t think about someone----“well, not that person---wrong nationality or....wrong accent....or wrong financial situation....or wrong color....” “Probably won’t fit in well.” Don’t think like that...just invite everyone! God’s Church is for all who wish to love, obey, and serve Jesus Christ!

And if they don’t have faith in Jesus Christ? Especially invite them! So that they come to faith in Him here!

Jesus did not reject that Lebanese woman in Matthew 15. Sure, He acted cold at first, He tested her, He didn’t make it easy. And she passed the test because her faith was real. Her faith was “great” as the Lord said. And He healed her daughter.

Our Lord Jesus Christ doesn’t care if you are Gentile or Jewish. He doesn’t care if you are black or white or brown or yellow. He doesn’t care how well off you are or what neighborhood you live in. He doesn’t care where you used to live or what county your ancestors lived in. He doesn’t care what language you speak or what accent you have.

He only cares about one thing----if you love Him, if you have faith in Him, if you want to live for Him. Just like that Lebanese woman 2000 years ago!

