

August 20, 2023 – Matthew 15:21-28

Country music has been in the news a lot recently. First, there was Jason Aldean's hit, "Try That in a Small Town." A song about the differences between big cities and small towns. About the kinds of behavior that are tolerated in urban areas that will result in a much more forceful response in a rural area.

Then, a couple weeks ago, there was another surprise hit released by a little known artist named Oliver Anthony. Who released a song entitled, "Rich Men North of Richmond." Which is a rant – a rather profanity laced rant, I might add – about the wealthy, powerful politicians of our country and the less-than-helpful decisions they make on a regular basis.

I find it interesting how these two songs have come out and become so popular in such a short span of time. But I think it just goes to show the kind of cultural divide in this country. The divide between urban and rural. The divide between rich and poor. The divide between those with money and power and those who feel penniless and powerless. We're a very divided country right now and the cultural tensions are reaching a boiling point.

That kind of tension is nothing new, though. Not in the United States. Not in world history. Large nations have always struggled to find unity between conflicting groups within their borders. Ancient Rome was certainly no exception. And the region of Palestine where Jesus lived and ministered was a perfect example.

Because the Romans had smashed together Jews and Gentiles into a single fairly small geographic region and told them, "You're all Romans. You're all going to get along now. And we don't really care if you don't like it. You just have to live with it."

And they really didn't like it. And they didn't always live with it. Sometimes, they got downright angry about it. I don't know if they wrote songs about it like Jason Aldean or Oliver Anthony. But they certainly threw around a lot of insults and abuse.

And so Jesus is walking into a bit of a powder keg when he travels to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Tyre and Sidon are cities a good distance from any Jewish area. They are outside of the borders of ancient Israel. Tyre and Sidon are firmly Gentile cities.

Why Jesus is going there we can only speculate. But the fact that it says he "withdrew" to there may mean that he was looking to take a small vacation. He had been teaching and performing miracles nonstop for over two years now. He just needed a break. And since every Jew recognized him by this point, the best place to rest was a region without as many Jews in it. Like that of Tyre and Sidon.

But even here, Jesus can't find a moment of silence. A Canaanite woman finds him and demands to see him. Now, the fact that she is described as Canaanite here is interesting. Because in this time period, Canaan as a geographic region no longer existed. Nor did being Canaanite as an ethnicity.

Which means that she must be Canaanite in religion. She worships the gods of Canaan. Gods like Baal and Molech, Asherah and Mammon. Gods that demanded huge physical sacrifices, but also promised huge physical rewards. Rewards of wealth and good weather and happiness and fertility and security. The gods of Canaan promised to fulfill your every wish, if only you proved to them your devotion.

These gods had plagued Israel from the moment they set foot in the Promised Land centuries earlier. Drawing people away from the one true God in exchange for health, wealth, and prosperity. Tempting them even into despicable practices like human sacrifice and prostitution. All in the promise of luxury.

And this woman worships these gods. It's no wonder the disciples want to turn her away. Not only is Jesus burned-out and in need of a break from the crowds. But this woman represents everything they despise anyway. Everything they hate about Gentiles.

And, at first, Jesus seems to agree with them. She begs and begs to see him. But Jesus ignores her. She begs and begs some more. But Jesus says, *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."* Finally, she somehow makes her way inside anyway. And she falls down at his feet, crying out, *"Lord, help me!"*

And he replies to her with an insult, *"It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."* I am the bread of life. I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel. To feed them my own body and blood for the forgiveness of their sins. And who are you? You're a Gentile. You're a worshipper of false gods. You're a dog. Begging for food from the dinner table. Begging for heavenly food that belongs to the children of God.

It's a patently offensive thing to say. Imagine if, today, some prominent pastor were to refer to Muslims as dogs. He'd be vilified for it. Imagine if a politician were to refer to African-Americans as dogs. He'd be run out of office.

And it's tempting to try and make excuses for Jesus here. "Oh, he's just referring to her as a pet. As a cute little puppy, begging at the table. Right?" No. He's not. This is just as derogatory as it sounds. More so, actually. Because we have a lot better opinion of dogs today than Jews did back then.

But the woman, surprisingly, isn't offended. In fact, she agrees with him. *"Yes, Lord."* She says. *"Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."* You're right. I'm not a Jew. I'm not one of the children of Israel. I have spent my life worshipping other gods. I don't belong at this table. But I'm here, and I'm asking anyway. I'm not asking my Gentile gods. I'm not asking Baal or Molech or Asherah or Mammon. I'm asking you. Because I believe that you are the only one who can help me.

And Jesus replies with something interesting. He says, *"Woman, you have great faith!"* It's not an uncommon expression from Jesus. He says something similar quite often. To the woman who was bleeding, to the man who was born blind, to the leper on the road, he says a similar thing each time, *"Your faith has made you well."*

But there's something special about this case. Because every other time Jesus says those words, and others like them, he's talking to a Jew. Or, at least, a Samaritan. People who believed in the God of Israel. People who had heard him preach and knew something about what he was teaching.

But this woman is a pagan Gentile from outside of Israel. She knows nothing about Jesus except two things: that he has the power to heal and that he has mercy to do so. And she, knowing nothing else about Jesus, has great faith.

You see, that's likely the reason why Jesus ignored her and rejected her and insulted her. Not because he actually looked down on her the way the disciples did and the way every other Jew would have. But because he wanted to show her and to show them and to show us exactly what great faith looks like.

And we might be surprised by what it looks like. Because it doesn't look like someone who shows up in church every single Sunday. It doesn't look like someone who tithes exactly 10% every week. It doesn't look like someone who has a Christian radio station on in their car and a little chrome fish on their trunk. It doesn't look like someone who goes to a Jason Aldean or Oliver Anthony concert.

I'm not saying those are bad things. But if those are what define your faith, then you've missed the point. You might as well be chasing after Baal or Molech or Asherah or Mammon. They're happy to take your money and devotion too.

No, great faith looks like someone who falls on their knees and says, "God, I'm a dog. I am unclean in thought, word, and deed. For, on top of a host of other sins, I have treated others with the same scorn that I deserve. I am a sinner and I don't deserve anything from you. But I know you are powerful and merciful and abundant in your grace. And so I come to you asking for a crumb of your forgiveness."

And in response, he doesn't just give us a crumb. He invites us to sit at the table. As we do this very day. Sitting here in these pews to hear his word. Kneeling before his altar, to receive his body and blood.

We who approach God's throne of grace come to him as sinful, filthy dogs, worthy to receive nothing from his hand. But we leave that throne as his children. Children who are given the bread of life, from his powerful, merciful, abundant hand.

Not because of anything we did. Not because we kept the Law. Not because we were born a Jew. Not because we were born a Lutheran, for that matter. But because we had faith in his grace toward us. Grace shown in the death and resurrection of his Son. That whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life.

If you believe that Jesus has the power to save you and you believe that he has the mercy to do so, then you have great faith. And the deepest request of your heart has been granted. Your sins are forgiven. Amen.