

August 16, 2020

Scripture: Matthew 15:21-28

Title: DESPERATE TIMES, CALL JESUS

Recently I read about a fascinating travel company called Black Tomato that offers a very special kind of vacation package. It's called a "Get Lost" tour. For a very large amount of money, you can pay the folks at Black Tomato to send you to a surprise destination in a challenging environment, like in a remote wilderness or a desert. Once you get to the airport, you receive essential information about your trip, a satellite phone and survival gear for your destination. Then, after your surprise excursion, it's up to you to make it back to safety and civilization.

Sounds like an episode from a reality television show! But there are no cameras following you around. The company website offers this assurance: "Your journey will be closely tracked by Black Tomato's experienced expedition operations teams, as a safety net. You won't see them, but they'll always be able to see you."

It takes a certain amount of courage, to take a trip, to a surprise destination, that requires survival gear. Most of us like to have a little more control, when it comes to our travel plans.

Once you understand a little background for today's Bible passage, you may question if Jesus was on a "Get Lost" tour of his own. Our passage begins like this: "Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon . . ."

Let me stop there for just a minute. Tyre and Sidon were Gentile towns about 50 miles away from where Jesus had last been in Galilee. Why did Jesus travel 50 miles into Gentile territory? Did he have some urgent business there? Did he sign up for a "Get Lost tour? The answer to both questions is No. There's no explanation provided as to why Jesus went to Tyre and Sidon. But he did. Now, let's continue our story.

"A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, 'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.'"

Do you think that Jesus came fifty miles from home, just to minister to this distraught mother? Who knows? After all, this is Jesus. Nobody cared about people, who are hurting, like Jesus. It doesn't make a difference, their religion or where they live.

This wasn't just any woman, this was a Canaanite woman. In Jesus day, no observant Jew, would speak with a woman outside his own family, and particularly not a Canaanite. They were traditionally considered, enemies of the Jewish people.

At first, Jesus seems to spurn her cries for help. Matthew tells us that after she made this desperate request of him, "Jesus didn't answer a word." That wasn't encouraging to this woman. Jesus' disciples were no help. They came to him and urged him, "Send her away, she keeps crying out after us."

She came and knelt before Jesus and said, "Lord, help me!"

Jesus replied with another crushing remark: "It's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." Now, it's time for Jesus to be surprised.

The Canaanite woman said, "Yes it is, Lord. Even the dogs eat the crumbs that

fall from their master's table.”

Scholars puzzle over Christ's conversation with this woman. It seems so un-Christ-like. But I wonder if Jesus wasn't giving this woman a test, a test of her desire to have her daughter healed, but even more important, a test of her faith, that he really could heal her daughter. I suggest that, because of the way Jesus ends this unusual story, He commends this woman for her great faith!

There are only three people in the Bible, who were specifically commended by Jesus, for their great faith: a Roman officer who pleaded with Jesus to heal his servant, a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years and touched the border of Jesus' robe in hopes of receiving healing, and this Canaanite woman, who came to Jesus begging him, to heal her demon-possessed daughter.

The funny thing is, none of these three people had the right, according to the Jewish law, to approach Jesus with a request for help. They were separated from him, by a huge wall of cultural and religious norms. We've already mentioned the Canaanite woman's lowly status. But the woman bleeding, was ritually unclean, due to her bleeding, and shouldn't have touched the border of Jesus' robe at all. As for the Roman officer, he was a representative of a Gentile government which oppressed the Jewish people. By Law, these three people did not have the right to bring their desperation to Jesus. But Jesus, didn't reject them, or correct them. In fact, he commended each one of them for their great faith.

Desperation is a scary state of being. Desperation can drive us to make bad choices. Many of us know what it's like to feel desperate, just like the Roman officer and the bleeding woman and the mother with the demon-possessed child. The agony, threatens to overwhelm us. We feel like we can't breathe.

There's a popular phrase. Desperate times, call for desperate measures. **I want to suggest to you, that a more helpful phrase would be “Desperate times, call for Jesus.”** That's the real truth of the matter.

This Bible passage about the Canaanite woman shows us, that desperation doesn't disqualify you, from having great faith. Neither does your gender or social status. All that's required, is the willingness to bring your desperate need to Jesus.

It's interesting. This woman who wasn't from the Jewish faith, addressed Jesus as Lord. The word she used, refers to one who is Supreme or Master. How did she know? Even when Jesus' own disciples weren't sure of his claims, this foreigner recognized who Jesus was. She knew, that the power of life, was in Jesus' hands. Somehow, she knew Jesus was her only hope.

Anne Lamott, a *New York Times* bestselling author, has said that her prayer every morning is, “Help me, help me, help me.” Her nightly prayer is “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” In between those two prayers, she says, is an occasional “WOW” prayer when she is suddenly aware of God's work in her daily life.

I think the Canaanite mother and Anne Lamott could understand each other's prayer life. “Help me, help me, help me!”, that's a legitimate prayer. Sometimes it's the only prayer we can manage. And notice, the Canaanite woman brought her desperation to Jesus, even when he initially responded with silence, and then seemed to turn her

away. Some people read this passage and think that Jesus was being insensitive to this mother's pain. But remember, it may be, that Jesus did come on foot, to this faraway Gentile town, 50 miles from home, just to meet this one desperate woman in her need. Even more impressive, Jesus came from the right hand of God, to this lonely planet, to help all of us, in our times of desperation. Desperate times call for Jesus.

In 2015, Kate Bowler was diagnosed with stage IV cancer in her abdomen. She was a divinity professor at Duke University, and mother to a one-year-old son. Kate and her husband were devastated by her diagnosis. In *Guideposts* magazine, Kate writes of how she always thought she had a deal with God, a *quid pro quo*, which means "a favor or advantage granted or expected in return for something."

Kate grew up as a good Christian girl, working hard, keeping all the rules. She married a good Christian man, got a doctorate in religious studies, and served in her church. Deep in her heart, Kate had thought that God might reward her for her faithfulness by giving her a manageable life. Dying young from a painful and invasive cancer didn't fit into this deal, she thought she had, with God.

She writes: "I had been hoping for control. Work hard, stay right with God and life will work out. The key word is, *and*. Do this, *and*, you get that. Action, result, guaranteed. That's control. She writes, "Ever since my diagnosis, I had been praying hard. But Jesus, I had to admit, never says that God offers us certainty. Jesus says, God offers us love. Could I love God, even knowing I could die in two months?"

That's a tough question! "Jesus never says, God offers us certainty. Jesus says, God offers us love." Jesus is absolute proof that God loves us.

Jesus may have walked a hundred miles, round trip, to Tyre and Sidon to minister to this Canaanite woman. And Jesus walked in our shoes, all the way to the cross, for no other reason, than he loves us. Jesus shared our weakness, our questions, our pain. Remember the night before his arrest, Jesus prayed so desperately, that he sweated drops of blood.

Jesus understands what it is, to be desperate. He didn't come to wave a magic wand and take away all our troubles. But he did come, to show us that we, are not alone. His message and his ministry kept coming back to this one truth: There is a God, and God loves you.

Desperate times call for Jesus. What was the Canaanite mother's first request of Jesus? ". . . have mercy on me." She knew that mercy, is an essential part of God's character. Even though, she knew she had no right to approach Jesus, she was counting on his mercy, to meet her daughter's needs. And notice, even when Jesus was silent, even when he tried to turn her away, she knelt down at his feet. The Greek word used here indicates, that she knelt down in worship before him. No matter whether he answered her cry for help or not, she would still worship him, because he is Lord, and because she could count on his mercy.

Dr. Keith Brantly served as a medical missionary in Liberia, West Africa. In 2014, an epidemic of the Ebola virus swept through Liberia. Over the course of 21 months, more than 11,000 people died from the virus. No one was safe. Healthy people died within days of being infected. So, imagine Dr. Brantly's fear when he began

manifesting symptoms of the disease. He put himself on immediate quarantine. His colleagues couldn't come near him. His family was back in the U.S. He had to deal with his illness and his fears all alone.

So, he picked up his Bible and took his desperation to the Lord. Dr. Brantly found comfort in a passage from Hebrews 4:16: "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." This verse became his focus for prayer, over the next few days, as his pain and nausea increased.

When tests confirmed that Dr. Brantly had contracted Ebola, he called his wife, Amber, in Texas to give her the news. Amber Brantly reports that her fear and sadness were so great, that she had trouble finding the words to pray. So instead, she simply sang hymns of trust, praising God in spite of their situation. The Brantlys took their need to Jesus in different ways, each one trusting in God's mercy and love, no matter what God's answer was to their prayers.

Dr. Brantly's colleagues arranged to have him flown to Atlanta for an experimental treatment for Ebola. Within a few days, his condition began to improve. And God mercifully answered the Brantlys' prayers when, a short time later, Dr. Brantly walked out of that Atlanta hospital, as a survivor of the Ebola virus.

Now, not everyone who trusts in Jesus, and suffers a serious disease, walks out of the hospital cured. But, if they don't walk out of the hospital cured, that doesn't mean their prayers were in vain. If they don't walk out of the hospital cured, they walk into the arms of Jesus, with a new perfect body, made whole at last.

Jesus complimented this Canaanite woman for her great faith. Great faith is pretty simple, at least by Jesus' standards. Bring your desperation to Jesus, and trust in God's love for you. The God who gave up God's power and majesty and ultimately God's life, to save us from the power of death, loves you too much, to ever turn you away. Desperate times don't always call for desperate measures, but desperate times always call for Jesus and then Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.