
HEALING ADVOCACY
MATTHEW 15:21-28
A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, AUGUST 20, 2023
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We need advocates, especially the little girl, the daughter of the Canaanite woman, in our gospel story. She has a quadruple whammy against her. She's a Canaanite, meaning a gentile, a woman, a child, and to make matters even worse, she's tormented by a demon. *All* odds are against her in that ancient society. All. To go a step further, the daughter, is the only one in this story who doesn't say a word. She's the tormented one. She's the one in sore need. She's the one who needs healing. But we don't hear a smidgeon from her. The disciples, the Canaanite woman, her mother, and Jesus do all the talking. Not a peep from this little girl. There's no sound rising out of the scripture to us from her ailing soul. Only silence.

How many people do we know who are suffering in silence today? Who are they? Where are they? This isn't unusual in that ancient time or ours. All the so-called wrong identities or traits or beliefs or affiliations or blemishes or illnesses can make you close to invisible in a so-called civilized society, and cause you to be silenced. Not heard from, even though you're the one in need, and you're still alive, though dead to many. Just placed on the margins of humanity because of a torment worse than the devastating tempestuous winds that blew through here this past week. She's going through so much more than the loss of electricity and downed trees. Hurting human beings like this daughter need an advocate.

We have advocates for so many things in our society—education, public policy, social justice, and more—but it is rare to hear about advocates for healing. To riff off of one of the insights of my chapel staff colleagues—just because we're known as a city of medicine doesn't mean we're a city of healing.

Yet there is one person in this story who is a healing advocate for the daughter. The Canaanite woman, her mother, cries out for her daughter who can't cry out, whose torment has terrifyingly twisted her tongue so much so that she has no voice or agency. Her mother gives voice to her dire situation and advocates for her when she can't do it for herself. The Canaanite woman wasn't just her mother; she was her intercessor. Oh that we all had people who would intercede on our behalf, with or without our knowing. Oh that we could sing that song, "Somebody prayed for me..." The Canaanite mother prayed. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." "Lord, help me." Some of the most effective prayers or most effective speeches are the most succinct. Three words—"Lord, help me." Sometimes that's all you can say and all you can pray on behalf of another person.

Someone has to speak up for those who have no voice. This is what advocacy is. Someone has to cry out for the tormented ones, the sick ones, the disabled ones, the imprisoned ones, the ridiculed ones, the anxious ones, the little ones in the foster care system. The Canaanite woman uses her freedom and agency on behalf of the freedom of another, her little daughter. As we inch toward another academic year (ready or not!), we all need people in our lives—who are for us—our champions; we all need people in our lives who will call our name in prayer to Jesus; we need people who will cheer us on in rooms we're not in and want the best for us and want us to be whole.

And advocates know that it takes courage to do advocacy work. Even here, the Canaanite woman—knowing that her region and culture and ethnicity and gender are considered an aberration and unclean to ancient Jewish religion of that time—musters up enough courage to cross over the social, political, and religious borders and plea to Jesus for help. She risks rejection and hatred for the healing of her ailing child. Advocates for others may even receive insults; she's called a dog. Advocates are not always wanted; the disciples want to send her away because of the noise she's making. It shows us that sometimes even followers of Jesus do not want to see other people healed or made whole. Ouch. This is why we need advocates in the face of all sorts of adversaries!

We need healing advocates who cry out and are courageous, and also know who to call on for help. The Canaanite woman, despite resistance, calls on Jesus for help. The psalmist was right: Our help cometh from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth. No one else could heal her daughter, so she desperately says, "Lord, help me." She goes

straight to the source of our salvation and healing. She didn't look for a politician to save. She didn't call on a university president for the answer. She cries out to Jesus for help. "Lord, help me." 'Lord, help us!'

And the good news is that Jesus does just that, regardless of the social and religious codes that would keep Jews and Gentiles apart. He heals her. The one on the other side of the tracks, Jesus—both culturally and religiously—is the one who heals the so-called enemy. Jesus crosses boundaries, traverses the wall, to help and heal one in need, despite the criticism he might receive for doing so. He will do what is necessary for your healing.

And note that it is the mother who speaks up in faith; it is her faith, not the daughter's, that leads to her daughter's healing. Jesus tells the mother, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." We don't know what the daughter's faith is or her belief system or her spiritual practices or whether she even had any. We just learn that the mother's faith leads to her daughter's healing. Wow! That means Jesus will act on our behalf even without us, without our speaking or our faith, when we are the ones in dire need. He knows what we need before we even ask and sometimes we don't even know we should ask. Even when we don't have a voice like this daughter or can't voice our concerns or our faith is feeble, others can advocate on our behalf to God. Others' faith and prayers can lead to our own healing. This demonstrates that the ecology of healing is communal actually. It is not just 'Jesus and me' but Jesus, the mother, and her daughter who was in need—a community of healing. We need advocates who will call our name and lift our cause to Christ. Or maybe we need to be an advocate for someone else.

In particular in this story, the tormented ones, the outcasts, the unclean, the foreigners, those who have no voice, the weird, the strange, the so-called dogs of society are brought into the fold of God's grace and healing. As the prophet Isaiah reveals and so does Jesus, the circle of God is always widening. As we hear in Isaiah from the lectionary passage, "Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered." The Lord's house is a house of prayer for *all* people, Isaiah says. All people. All means all. This is why the Chapel's mission names "the all-inclusive love of God." Even the ones who have all the odds stacked against them.

The good news is that no one is out of the bounds of the grace of God and his loving embrace and healing. Not a Canaanite woman nor her tormented daughter, not the irregular church attendee, not the one who has more questions than answers about the Bible, not a doubter, not one who is far off like a lost son, not one who is sinking deep in sin far from the peaceful shore. There was and is no theological criteria to receive the healing of Jesus; remember, the one in need did not even speak and it wasn't *her* faith that led to her healing.

Everyone, all people, deserve the healing touch of Christ. This is why all people are welcome here at Duke Chapel and at the Lord's table because all belong here as we all belong to Jesus. This is not about your belief system, this is about the grace of God flowing to all from ancient Tyre to Thomasville. It's not your beliefs that save or heal, it's not how loud you cry out that saves or heals, it's not how many Bible verses you can quote that saves or heals, it's not your political stances that save or heal; even if you don't know what to say and are silent like the daughter, it's okay, because it's Jesus who saves and heals, no matter who you are. That's the good news of the gospel.

We might be in a city of medicine, but 'Lord, help us' to be a chapel of healing. Amen.