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Our Great Physician Without Borders

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TEXT: Matthew 15:21-28 (ESV)

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out 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." And He answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread 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, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Dear Friends:

An organization we sometimes hear about on the news is a group called "Doctors Without Borders." Doctors Without Borders is a coalition of doctors and health care workers from all over the world that seeks to bring life-saving medical care to those who are most in need. They bravely go to populations in distress, to victims of natural or manmade disasters, and even to victims of armed conflict. They do so irrespective of gender or race or religion, creed, or political convictions. They work strictly under the principle of impartiality. And they have done some truly great, life-saving work all over the world.

You could say about today's passage that we are observing the "Great Physician Without Borders" at work. Jesus, on more than one occasion, did refer to Himself as the physician who came for the sick, for the sinner. In our reading, we find Him in foreign territory. He's been rejected and criticized by His own people as of late. Even His own family in His own hometown have rejected Him, and the Pharisees and scribes are criticizing Him for breaking the tradition of the elders now. His ministry is causing controversy. So He takes a break along with His disciples and goes up north to foreign territory along the Mediterranean Sea, the district of Tyre and Sidon. It's enemy territory; Canaanites, pagan people who worship other gods, live there. Even Jesus Himself talked of their wickedness before God back in chapter 11 of Matthew.

"And behold," scripture tells us. Whenever you see one of those, that that means that we're about to see something extraordinary happen. Jesus is approached by a woman in need; she has a daughter who's suffering terribly. She says her girl is oppressed by a demon. Now, this woman is obviously heard some rumblings about Jesus somewhere. She refers to Him as the "Son of David" as she calls out to Him, which was a title for the Messiah of Israel. She also has heard of His power and authority over everything because she comes asking His help to cure her daughter, to set her free. But Jesus doesn't answer her. He remains silent. Why is that? Is He testing her? Or is He testing the disciples as well? All we know is He keeps on walking and she keeps on following, crying for help. The disciples, finally at the end of their rope, they beg Him, "Send her away. She's crying after us." Perhaps they were concerned about her drawing attention to them in this foreign territory – that could be dangerous for them. Or maybe they simply see this foreigner as a pest that's bugging them; she's like a fly that just keeps irritating them. Maybe they mean, "Jesus, help her out. Quiet her up." After all, we have to take seriously the words that Jesus uses when he responds to the disciples begging. He says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." He must have sensed, perhaps, that they were saying "Help her." With these words He's saying, "I need to be obedient to the commission given me by my Heavenly Father, to go only to the lost sheep of Israel, to limit my ministry." Of course, that could make sense, I suppose. After all, He's the fulfillment of all that was promised to Israel in the Old Testament: to make them a blessing to the nations of the world, a light to the nations. And Jesus did tell the disciples earlier on when He sent them out to go two by two, that they were not to go to the Gentiles or Samaritan cities with the announcement of the Kingdom of God. They were to limit themselves to the lost sheep of Israel.

But this woman's persistence, she finally runs ahead of the group and kneels before Jesus, and a second time says, "Lord, help me," stopping Jesus in his tracks. Jesus says something to her that has bothered a lot of people over history because it sounds harsh and unkind. He says, "It's not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Before we get too excited about this, the word that He uses for dogs here is not like the street, vagrant dogs. It's an image of little pups, domesticated dogs. We have to ask what's going on here, though, when He says it. Is Jesus perhaps exposing, saying out loud the very prejudice of his Jewish disciples towards non-Jews? Is He teaching them a lesson here? Many Bible scholars think so. Because we'll see that prejudice of theirs again in the book of Acts, as they puzzle over whether the good news of Christ was for non-Jewish people, asking should we be welcoming these kind of people into the church?

Well, there's no stopping this woman. She loves that daughter of hers. She believes Jesus can help. So she persists and says something that is rather witty and clever, but also full of truth. She says, "Yes, Lord. Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." She's agreeing with Jesus, she says, "I'm not asking for a place at the Jewish table, I'm just looking for a crumb from the master of that table." And Jesus affirms her faith by exclaiming, "Woman, great is your faith. Be it done for you as you desire." And we're told that the daughter is instantly healed. We see that Jesus now has the power and authority over demons, and to top it off, His power extends even into foreign territories. It seems to have no limits – amazing.

He refers to her faith as a "great faith." We need to pay attention to that. He hadn't found much of that so far in the earlier part of this chapter amongst His own people, had He? They criticized Him. And in the chapter before even His disciples had what He referred to as nothing more than little faith. So why is this considered great faith, this statement? Because she sees something that many aren't seeing so far. She's seeing the working of the Kingdom of God. She's been given, somehow, a faith vision of the past and present and future at work, because in Jesus, she sees God's redemptive plan for the world, which began with Abraham, his descendants becoming a blessing to the nations. Gathering, as Isaiah said, in the temple in prayer, the prayer of the nations before God. She believes that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever (even her) believes in Him shall not perish. She's ahead of her time. She's already seen Easter and the Great Commission and the miracle of Pentecost, where all the nations miraculously hear the gospel message of salvation in Christ in

their own native tongue. She's caught a glimpse of John's vision from Jesus in Revelation, where every tongue and tribe and nation praises God at His throne, crying out, "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

Her great faith reminds me of a passage from the book of Hebrews 11: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." She's seeing something. She's been given this kind of faith. It's a gift from God. And I think Jesus is smiling as he explains to her woman, "Great is your faith." And we know that the disciples still didn't get it. They didn't understand Jesus and they didn't understand His mission. They still didn't take in that Jesus wants everybody in the world to trust in Him; that His love has no borders. It took Peter until Acts 10, in that spirit-filled encounter with Cornelius, the Italian gentile soldier who, upon hearing the gospel from Peter, was filled with the Holy Spirit and faith in Christ. It's then that Peter's eyes were finally opened, and he catches the glimpse that this woman has: God's great picture, big picture. He announced, "Truly now, now, I perceive that God shows no partiality." He finally got it. Jesus is the Great Physician with no borders. He's for everyone – God wants everyone to come into a relationship with Him.

And there you have it. The Great Physician without borders. His love and mercy knows no bounds, no borders. Every one of us is created in the image of God, valuable and precious in his sight. Every one of us are created for a relationship with God. Every one of us have sinned and fallen short of His glory. Every one of us were died-for on the cross. The ground before the cross is level; we all need salvation. And every one of us has a promise of eternal life, through Jesus Christ, offered to us. And every one of us has an invitation to come to His table of grace. All are welcome. This story is announcing to us that Jesus, this Jesus who has been given authority over all things in Heaven and on Earth, who has authority over even demons, the power of evil, His gift of salvation that He brings, is intended for everyone, even the likes of you and me.

Maybe you or someone is listening in today who thinks that you're hopeless, that you've crossed the line and are now simply a write-off to God. The message is: no, you're not. He came for you. You're lost; He came to rescue you from your lost-ness, from sin and death and the power of the devil, to change the trajectory of your life and give you eternal life. He says to you today, come to Him in faith, believing in Him, come to Him with repentance, leaving behind the old life, following him into the new. You are more than welcome at his salvation table. And know this; it's important that

you know this: that the privilege of coming to Jesus really is all grace. We're invited to the welcome table, not because you and I are so lovable and good. We are anything but that. We aren't invited because we've done some particularly good things for the world. We come invited to that table because someone who was perfect by God's standards, Jesus Christ, gave His life at a cross to rescue you and me from our sin and give us forgiveness and life everlasting. There is salvation in Christ alone waiting for you and for me if we come to Him.

This story is not only good news, it's challenging news for those of us who belong to Christ, Jesus. There's some vision casting, actually, vision-broadening, going on in this story. We, as his church, need to be a kingdom people without borders, just like our King. We are to receive with open arms those who come looking for the help of Jesus, no matter what their background is. We are to be a great commandment- and a great commission-people, loving God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and neighbor as self; making disciples of all nations, all kinds of people. My neighbor is to be anyone in need who needs help in Christ's love and the gospel. My neighbor may be a difficult person who I can't stand, who drives me crazy. He or she may be someone who is of a different culture, a different political persuasion, a different ethnicity or value system, maybe even an enemy or a person of another religion. Jesus came for everyone.

And where else is God to send them for rescue and restoration, if not to you and me as members of the Body of Christ, His church? After World War Two, German students volunteered to help rebuild a cathedral in England, one of many casualties of the bombings. As the work progressed, debate broke out on how to best restore a large statue of Jesus with His arms outstretched and bearing the familiar inscription "Come unto me." Careful patching could repair all damage to the statue except for Christ's hands, which had been destroyed by bomb fragments. Should they attempt the delicate task of reshaping those hands? Finally, the workers reached a decision that still stands today. The statue of Jesus has no hands, and the inscription now reads, "Christ has no hands but ours." We are not only His hands, we are His feet, and we are His mouthpiece with the gospel to go to everyone and receive everyone in His name.

I remember years ago we were confirming about 80 to 90 young people each year at my church. And of course, we would bring in a photographer to take a group picture as well as some individual shots. On more than one occasion, it seemed to take forever to

get the group picture taken. That's a lot of people. And the kids would be squirming and they'd ask, "Why is it taking so long? It's too long." And the photographer would say to us, "I want to get everyone in the picture." That could well be the theme for today's message. This Jesus, who has been given all power and authority, who has the ability to change the trajectory of people's lives for the better, will not turn anyone away who comes in faith seeking His help because He wants everyone in the picture of His love and grace. So may we, as His church, faithfully and obediently follow in His footsteps.

Amen.