



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
Douglas E. Murray, Pulpit Guest

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He Said What?

Isaiah 56:1-8; Matthew 15:21-28

Before I read our Scripture, let me say first how gratifying it is to help lead worship with Clyde Patterson. He is a wizard on the organ, and a wonderful Christian gentleman. And let me apologize for my scruffy appearance this morning. I am attempting to grow a beard.

I also want to tell you how much it has meant to me to have a congregation like Lakeside a few miles up the road from Wilson. Your presence here has been a constant encouragement to me. I have visited here more than once when I had a free Sunday.

You don't know it, but, you helped me to stay in the pastorate as long as I did in Wilson. In 2003, I asked my church to grant me a summer sabbatical. That was a strange new idea for First Baptist Church, but when they heard that none other than Gaylord Lehman could be their summer pastor, they got excited! They and Gaylord had a wonderful summer together; and I had a time of renewal that helped me to stay in the pastorate much longer without burning out.

And it has been a great comfort and encouragement to me to know your pastors, Jody and Elizabeth. Both of them have preached for us in Wilson. Each time, our congregation realized that they had heard an extraordinarily gifted and dedicated preacher. So I'm glad to return the favor today, while Jody and Deborah are meeting for the first time their one year old granddaughter from Slovakia.

One more word: today you are wondering whether I will say anything about Charlottesville and the evils of Nazism and racism that gathered there. I'm going to focus on the Scripture that I was led to weeks ago for this day. It turns out that part of it does have something to say about Charlottesville.

He said what? When the Canaanite woman pleaded with Jesus to heal her daughter, it's hard to believe that Jesus said what he said. This goes into the category of "Things I Wish Jesus Had Never Said!"

· When this desperate mother pleaded with Jesus for her daughter, I wish that Jesus had not ignored her. A second time, when the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Please do something about her," I wish that Jesus had not said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." And a third time, when the woman came, kneeled before him, and pleaded, "Lord help me," I really wish that Jesus had not said, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

So, Jesus called this pleading woman a dog?

We preachers really don't like this passage. We try to defend Jesus. We say he was just joking or he was just testing her. But a careful, conservative reading of the Scripture does not support those theories.

What is going on here? I believe we are standing before one of the mysteries about who Jesus is: the mystery of how Jesus is fully human and at the same time fully divine. The Book of Hebrews says that Jesus was tempted in all ways like every other human being. (4:15) Every now and then isn't it tempting to say, "Just leave me alone!?" Jesus was exhausted by performing mighty works, frazzled by debates with the authorities, grief-stricken by the execution of John the Baptist. No matter who might need him, Jesus was tempted to say, "Just leave me alone." But Hebrews also says that, tempted in all ways as we, Jesus did not sin.

And then came this Canaanite woman. At first, Jesus was so human toward the woman, so much like one of us. Leave me alone. But by the end of the story, Jesus was so divine that he performed a miracle. So human, and yet so divine.

We are also standing before the mystery of what happens when a human being and Jesus meet each other in an honest, unfiltered, unrestrained encounter. Wherever a human being and the divine being meet, something is going to happen. Whenever a human being and Jesus meet, somebody is going to change. That is exactly what happened when this Canaanite woman met Jesus. Everybody involved in this encounter changed. Of course the daughter was changed; she was healed. But her mother was also changed. And the disciples who saw this were changed. Even Jesus was changed.

Dare I say it? Jesus was changed by his encounter with this desperate woman. That sounds a bit brazen...until you consider the alternative, the Greek view of divinity. The Greeks had a cold view of what a god was like. They believed that a god was an indifferent being -- unchanged and unaffected by human influences. Nothing a human being could do could ever ruffle the feelings of the gods.

But that is not the God of the Bible. Remember Mt. Sinai? God had just saved the Hebrew slaves from Egypt and given Moses the Ten Commandments. But before Moses could take the tablets down the mountain, the people started worshiping that golden calf. And God saw red, and told Moses, "Stand back. I'm going to wipe them off the face of the earth." (Paraphrase of Exodus 32:10-11)

But Moses stepped between God and the people and said, "If you do that, the whole world will say that you brought us out here just to kill us. And what about the promise you made to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, your promise to make your people as numerous as the stars in the sky?" And at that point, guess what God did? "... the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people." (Exodus 32:14) The King James Version says it more strongly: "...the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people." Amazing language about the Holy One.

What does this tell us? Unlike the pantheon of Greek deities, Yahweh God is deeply affected by people. Sometimes that's bad news. But that's good news to anyone who desperately needs God to hear one's cries and be moved enough to act.

Now back to Jesus and that desperate Canaanite mother. This woman would not be ignored. She was persistent, like that other woman who had dared to touch the hem of Jesus' garment (Matthew 20:30). She was persistent, like that blind Bartimaeus who wouldn't shut up but kept yelling, "Lord Jesus, have mercy on us, son of David!" (Luke 18:35-43) In fact, this Canaanite mother used that same language: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." "Lord, help me." She called him Lord three times. Even her body language was worshipful: she kneeled down before him. And when Jesus said, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," the woman answered with such wit and faith: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." She had faith that the crumbs from the master's table would be enough. Now, for months, Jesus had been trying to teach his disciples that God's kingdom is like a heavenly banquet with enough for all, but they were slow to get it. This foreign woman got it!

She understood the kingdom better and had more faith than the disciples. So Jesus said, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

The persistence of that woman, the wit of that woman, the worship of that woman, the faith of that woman, moved Jesus to change his mind and grant her plea. He also adjusted his timetable for reaching out to the Gentiles, and started doing so from then on. It was the beginning of the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. The gospel was going to the dogs.

Dare we speak of Jesus in terms of changing and learning and growing? The Bible does. Remember the words of Luke about Jesus growing up: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." (Luke 2:52) Healthy humans grow and mature. Jesus was fully human and grew and matured. Yet as Jesus grew, we see him dealing with every situation in a godly way. Jesus was fully divine.

Jesus was changed by that encounter with that faithful Gentile woman. He took something with him from that day on. He would always remember how she moved him. Now think of the implications for you and God. The universe is different for God because you exist; you are that precious to God. You can move God in a way that only you can. Your prayers to God make a difference.

Now if Jesus was changed by that encounter with the woman, think how much she was changed by her encounter with him! What do we know of this woman's life before she met Jesus? She was from the "district of Tyre and Sidon." Tyre and Sidon was to Galilee as the Triangle is to eastern North Carolina: far more wealthy. She came from a wealthy region of traders, maybe she herself was a wealthy merchant. We know something else about this woman from Mark's version of this event, which says she "was a Gentile..." (Mark 7:26) That means she was a woman of the dominant Greek culture, fluent in the worldwide language of trade, familiar with Greek customs. In other words, she was well connected. Wealthy, and well connected.

Now see this wealthy, well-connected woman pleading with this poor, backwoods carpenter-holy man. What a comedown to have to chase after him. How embarrassing to have to kneel before him and call him "lord." What a big change in her life for this affluent, well-connected woman to admit that she was desperate for the help of this peasant holy man.

But she was desperate for the sake of her daughter. She would give up any power, any privilege, any pride to save her daughter. So she humbled

herself like a dog begging for scraps. And maybe that's exactly what she needed to do. So she changed.

On my last Sunday as Pastor in Wilson, we had some baptisms. One of the people baptized was a man in his sixties. It's not an easy thing for an adult to be baptized. When you come down into the water, barefoot and shivering, with all those people out there watching, status and pride are the last things that come to mind. Yet Logan did it. He needed the forgiveness of Christ for his past; he needed the leadership of Christ for his future. Logan humbled himself to receive that blessing.

I think coming to Christ is more difficult for successful, well-off Americans than for anybody else on earth. We are well connected; we can have just about anything that we want. So how embarrassing it is to admit that we desperately need something that our status and wealth can never get for us. To admit our need for forgiveness and for Jesus in our lives is a real comedown in status. For an American to seek Jesus is just as humbling as that woman on her knees in the dust crying, "Have mercy on me, Lord, son of David..." This is the gospel for the well-off and the well-connected: When that well-off woman met Jesus, she was changed.

But there is more. The disciples watching all this were changed, too. They had tried to shoo away this woman. It seems they did a lot of shooing: shooing children away from Jesus, walking through Jericho and trying to make blind Bartimaeus shut up. The disciples saw themselves as the bouncers of Jesus' entourage. They tried to control the perimeter.

The disciples thought the Canaanite woman was too far gone, not worth the trouble, to be kept outside the perimeter. How strange they felt to see such great faith in her, greater than their own. What they saw changed them. Eventually, those disciples nurtured a Church that included every kind of person. In the first century, the Church became the one place where every kind of person was included: slave or free, male or female, Jew or Gentile, all in one family of faith. No one was too far gone.

There are people today whom we think are too far gone. There is such hopelessness over young black males. So many of them are snared in the cycle of poverty, academic failure, petty theft, then drugs. A general slide and skid toward imprisonment.

In Charlottesville, we saw others whom we think are also too far gone. So many young white males are also overcome by hopelessness that turns into lostness. It is the kind of hopelessness that can produce a Dylan Roof

in Charleston, or a James Fields in Charlottesville, or any other young white supremacist or neo-Nazi.

To us, they are all too far gone. They are all to be kept outside the perimeter. These hopeless young blacks, these hopeless young whites – they are dogs to us.

All this moved a friend of mine, Larry Coleman, to wonder, "Is it time that we as Christians and as Americans begin to think more seriously about the shadow of hopelessness, fear, sometimes negative resignation that is expressed violently and dangerously in the young American male regardless of their race?" (Facebook post by Larry Coleman August 14, 2017)

During the civil rights struggle in the sixties, Will Campbell was a young minister and activist. Friends of his were killed in the cause of racial equality. Yet when a local Klan leader was arrested and jailed, it was Will Campbell who went and visited him and even befriended him. Both of them were changed.

When Jesus met the Canaanite woman, he was changed, and she was changed, and the disciples were changed:

Jesus, so human and so divine, lowered himself to meet the crying need of this desperate woman.

The woman, so well-connected and so wealthy, lowered herself to receive the healing grace of God for her daughter.

The disciples, so protective of Jesus and of their status with him, were humbled to watch a miracle of faith and healing for an outsider, and realized that no one was too far gone..

Who here is ready to be changed? Who here is willing to lower yourself to your knees and say, "Lord Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me?"

## **Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession**

**August 20, 2017**

We gather here week by week, Holy God, because in the midst of the challenges and tensions and uncertainties of life, we know that in this sacred place and among these our brothers and sisters is where we should be. We gather to experience your presence through the nurturing of your Holy Spirit, to hear an inspiring word or melody that might cause our hearts to soar above

the mundane concerns of the day, and to receive an encouraging word or embrace that will reassure us that we are cared for and accepted. We gather because in this world of conflict and confusion, we need to be reminded of the peace which only you can bring and to hear again the good news that your truth will set us free.

Even while we come with gratitude for the abundance of these gifts and all the loving-kindness you offer to us, O Lord, we confess that we also come with reservations. We are called to be your followers, but yours can be a costly discipleship, sometimes requiring of us more than we bargained for. Your never-ending streams of mercy call forth our hymns of praise, and your amazing love inspires us to offer our souls, our lives, our all, yet we often feel inadequate to live out the demands of the gospel. You call us to extend welcome and a cup of cold water to others in your name, yet our suspicion of the other causes us to hesitate to be hospitable and our pessimism convinces us that our resources are inadequate to meet the needs around us. We hear the difficult truths of your word and are confronted by the teachings of Jesus which challenge our assumptions and nudge us from our comfortable places. We sense the stirring of your Spirit who will not leave well enough alone, who nestles deep within our souls and seeks to transform us in ways that are both inviting and unsettling. And so we begin to wonder whether we have the strength or the courage to claim the name of Christ and to live as your disciples at all.

Create us anew, Loving God, that we might recognize and live the fullness of your image within us. Cleanse and redeem us, Merciful Christ, that we might become suitable vessels, fragile though we are, to carry your gospel to the world you came to love and serve. Fill and empower us, Renewing Spirit, that we might be equipped to respond to the needs around us out of the abundance we have been given. Grant us the patience to do the work of discerning your will. Grant us the wisdom to reject anything that hinders the joyful and abundant life you intend for us. Grant us the courage to resist evil and hate wherever we encounter them and to stand against injustice not because it is profitable or popular but because it is your calling for our lives. And grant us the strength to reach out beyond ourselves to extend mercy wherever we find suffering, always remembering that in your kingdom, we must lose ourselves in order to find our true life in you.

We give witness to our faith that we do not travel this journey alone, as we pray in the name of the Risen Christ who came to dwell among us and by the power of the Holy Spirit who abides with us still. Amen.

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