

2023 Michigan Annual Conference
Sunday Worship
June 4, 2023
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God is good all the time and all the time God is good. I'm just awed that God would invite me to be the one breaking bread for us this morning. Thanks be to God. New every morning is your love great God of light. And all day long you are working for good in the world. Stir up in us a desire to serve you, to live peacefully with our neighbors and all creation, and to devote our lives to your son, our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

New every morning. What a good call to worship. And I want to add to it this amazing poem by Mary Oliver in her book, *Felicity*, it's called *This Morning*. "This morning the redbirds' eggs have hatched and already the chicks are chirping for food. They don't know where it's coming from, they just keep shouting, "More! More!" As to anything else, they haven't had a single thought. Their eyes haven't yet opened, they know nothing about the sky that's waiting. Or the thousands, the millions of trees. They don't even know they have wings. And just like that, like a simple neighborhood event, a miracle is taking place." Thanks be to God for this new day that we've never had before when a miracle is taking place in the Michigan Conference and in the United Methodist Church. Amen.

Matthew 15:21 has been read to us. It began with, "... Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon." Wait, wait...Jesus withdrew to the districts of Tyre and Sidon. Tyre and Sidon. Where is that? Bethlehem, I know a little town of Bethlehem. Jerusalem, I know Jerusalem. Even Galilee and Capernaum I know. But Tyre and Sidon? Nobody ever got inspired to write a song about Tyre and Sidon. Someone crack open the map. There is a reason there are maps at the back of your hard copy Bibles. Or some of us might just simply say, "Alexa, where is Trye Sidon." When it comes to the location of Tyre and Sidon friends, I don't know how to put it simply except to say we're not in Kansas anymore. Tyre and Sidon are the farthest north that Jesus travels in the gospel stories other than when he was a refugee as a baby in Africa. There's only one time in the Gospels we hear of Jesus living in the Promised Land. Here we are with Jesus in Tyre and Sidon.

This sounds so much like the United Methodist Church in this new chapter of our denomination. Here we are with Jesus in Tyre and Sidon. I suggest that the soundtrack for this parable be Mark Miller's piece, *Draw the Circle Wide*. Be prepared for some surprises. And such a big surprise that the gospel writer of Matthew helps us by punctuating the surprise with "and behold!" "And behold!" Google "and behold". "Behold" is used 1,298 times in the King James Version of the Bible. "Behold!" It's usually spoken by prophets or by God. It means look, open your eyes, pay attention, and don't miss this.

Isaiah 43:19 "Behold, I will do a new thing".

John 1"29 "Behold the Lamb of God".

Revelation 3:20 "Behold, I stand at the door and knock"

Matthew "And behold, a Canaanite woman came out".

A Canaanite woman. I don't know about you, but this does not look good. A Canaanite woman...everything is wrong with this picture. I did not even realize there were any Canaanites left. The story I know is that the Hebrew children escaped Pharaoh. Moses led them in an exodus of 40 years through the desert toward the promised land. They got to the Promised Land and they found there were people the Yahweh calls Canaanites. The Canaanite's religion and way of life are described as abominable. Deuteronomy 20:16 to 18 "But as for the towns of these people, that the Lord your God is giving you as inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them." That's from the Bible. And the Harper Collins dictionary of the Bible writes, "Israel's literature urges their eradication of Canaanite religion together with its Canaanite people."

I don't know what to do with this. Canaanites were indigenous people, and their eradication sounds as if it was religiously sanctioned. I don't know what to do with this. I'm stuck. I am so stuck. No commentary will be able to help me here. Did you read that essay by Jace Weaver? A Cherokee who was the director of the Institute of Native American Studies at the University of Georgia wrote, "There was a belief among European Christians that America was the promised land and the indigenous of the land were the sinners or wholly possessed of Satan who deserved to be slaughtered." I don't know what to do with this. Some of us just avoid it and it becomes the elephant in the room. Give us happy-clappy stuff and not this one, just ignore it. The Canaanite woman in the Jesus story "and behold she came out", says the gospel of Matthew "came out", came out". And I can't help thinking to myself, she came out of the closet. What drives her to do such a brave thing as come out? Why take such a risk knowing that her extermination is religiously sanctioned, knowing that they will kill her and call her killing God's work? What makes her so courageous I want to know. Does she not know from whose people Jesus has come from? Does she not know? Of course, she knows. She does not call him rabbi, or teacher, or master, or Lord. She calls him "Son of David". Son of David. That is a political term. This is an activist right here. Politics. "Son of David". These are fighting words. Of course, she knows who he is. She knows the Deuteronomy story. She knows his story. "Son of David," she says, because people in the margins always know the dominant culture stories. Although the dominant culture doesn't know our stories, we know their story. Son of David, she comes. What drives her? What drives her? I'll tell you what drives her, desperation, that's what's driving her. She is the desperate mother of a child who is deathly ill, so ill, that the child is not physically present. She is elsewhere. And this mother of a sick child, because a mother is a mother whether a Canaanite, or Israelite, or American. A mother is a mother, a mother of a sick child. She puts herself on the line. A mother of a sick child is a mother of a sick child.

Growing up on the slopes of Mount Kenya, there is a bird. It's a black and white bird. And this bird, if it should come back to its nest and find its eggs missing, goes from home to home. Stands at the gate of every home and starts saying "Mother of this home, I'm speaking to you. Help me find my children, mother of this home. Help me find my children, mother in this home. Help me find my children. I'm speaking to the mother in this home. Help me find my children, mother of this home. Help me find my children." That is the Canaanite woman right there. "Help me find my children. I'm speaking to the mother of this home." Here she comes, "Son of

David". And we are told Jesus is silent. Not a word. We're not told why he is silent. Your guess is as good as mine. I think Jesus was stuck. So, either way, he was not going to be able to solve this. If I had given him advice, I would've said, don't go to Tyre and Sidon, stay home, stay home, stay home. If you go looking for trouble, trouble will find you. Stay home. Stay within the safe passages. Don't go here.

His hands are tied. But the disciples, their hands are not tied. They tell Jesus, "Tell her to leave, to go away, send her away". The Canaanite woman she comes to Jesus, and she kneels before Jesus. He has to listen to her. He cannot ignore her. She has blocked his path. Reminds me of, many general conferences where finally the path was blocked, and we had to have a special conference. You cannot ignore this anymore. And finally, Jesus has to address her. Jesus has her on his path. It's the only way, if not around her, or fly above her, or go back, but face to face with Jesus.

She calls him another name, "Lord". Eyeball to eyeball with Jesus. "Lord." Politics aside, "Lord, help me." Yes, human to human. "Lord, help me." Looking him in the eye, Jesus confesses to her his hands are tied. His mission is to a specific group of people. And the people he has been sent to have a story of such scorn, disdain, and disgust for her people that they refer to them as dogs. She knew that. She must have known that. That must have been one of those things people say when they call certain people certain words. Nothing new here. His hands are tied. I almost feel like whispering to her, "Wait for the apostle Paul. He's the one who's going to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Not now, later". But if you have a sick child, there is no later. It's now. The desperate mother will not take no for an answer. She uses his argument against him. She simply rides it. She does not argue because she's a mother who is desperate. She just simply says, "God's table is so abundant". God's table. Jesus' eyes are on God's table. "Because God's table is so abundant, there are crumbs bound to fall. And I am willing to take that crumb because it is God's table and our miserly, stingy, close-fisted human history and ways we deal with each other cannot deny the least among us because God's table is so abundant that even those who do not belong to the US are fed". And behold Jesus grants her prayer. And from a distance, without even holding the Canaanite girl's hand, the Canaanite girl child is healed. This is a new instrument added to God's symphony. This is a whole new instrument added to God's amazing, amazing symphony. This one is a child of God, welcomed. Son of David. Lord, help me.

A few years ago, driving from Nairobi to Meru, I was in a big conversation with the person I was driving with and we had a passenger in the back of the car. We were talking about God and the Bible. This was one of the old men in our Methodist tradition. As we drove, we talked about God and our experience of God. And this person was from a totally different perspective from mine, and we were talking, and discussing. It was almost like a Canaanite woman with Jesus. We were there discussing, talking, and talking. We were not paying attention to the passenger in the back. We didn't even know the passenger in the back seat. That was someone who, a friend of ours, a friend of a friend, of a friend who had asked us to give them a ride to Meru. We just knew we had to drop them at a certain place, and we totally ignored them. We get to where we are, dropping them off and they say to us, can I be baptized? We did not even know he could speak. We looked at him and said, "What"? He said, "I want to be baptized". So, my

friend said, "You are a minister. You can baptize, and I'm a lay person I can witness". I think we can get this done." And so, I took my hymn book and found the passage and we did our baptism right there with water from our water bottles.

When persons join our congregation whether from the Catholic tradition or from the Baptist tradition, when they come and join, they are always so surprised to learn that they do not need to be baptized again. That baptism is about God. That is a promise from God. And you don't need to be re-baptized. We remind you of your baptism, but you are already in because whether you are Canaanite or Israelite or Egyptian, whether you are Indian or cowboy, whether you are African or European, baptism says you are a beloved child of God. And even as we part, even as we come to this new place in our history, whether you stay or whether you leave, we know one thing, our baptism goes with us. Our baptism stays with us, and we belong to God. All of us, regardless of our theology or ideology, or commitments, or books of discipline, all of it, we are a beloved child of God. Son of David help me. Lord, have mercy on me. New every morning is your love great God of light. And all day long you are working for good for the world.

Amen.