

Whatever It Takes

Matthew 15:10-28 August 14, 2005

A Sermon by Pastor Brad Smith

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The sermon in a sentence: Jesus will do whatever it takes to form a deep relationship with us.

Why I am preaching it: So that the congregation will be able to discern how Jesus is working in their/our life.

My cousin Bob, like me, has a poor sense of direction. But his sister Patty is just the opposite. One time they flew into the San Francisco airport, rented a car, and headed into the city, with Bob driving. They were driving along rapidly enough, but Bob was surprised how long it was taking them to get where they wanted to be. Finally he expressed his surprise to Patty. She replied, “Well, it probably will take a long time. San Francisco is north of the airport, and you took the freeway entrance going south.” He was so mad at her. I don’t know how long she would have let him keep going the wrong way if he hadn’t said something. But he took the next exit, and got into the northbound lanes. Now depending upon the time of day, traffic might have been much lighter going south. Going north might have been slow and frustrating. But that is the direction he had to go if he was ever going to reach his goal.

Jesus had a goal in his interaction with the Canaanite woman as well. He wanted to draw her to himself, to bless her, and to bless others through her. If we are not clear on what he is aiming at, the passage we just read will seem pretty strange. It doesn’t seem to fit the loving, compassionate Jesus that we like to think about. But Jesus had a goal in mind, and in every verse of this passage he moves toward that goal. His goal determined everything he did. You can never judge how effective anybody is until you understand what they are trying to accomplish.

Let me give you an example from my days as a missionary in Latin America. When I was in Spanish language school in Costa Rica, I once sent out a letter to my supporters describing my activities for a typical day. They included buying chicken, eggs, and bread, getting some money from the bank, and borrowing a book from our next door neighbors.

Soon afterwards I got a letter from a friend expressing some concern that I was accomplishing so little during my days. I realized where he was coming from. In the U.S., we go to one store, choose all our items, and if we are lucky, we can get them through the checkout line pretty fast. Some stores like Home Depot, are beginning to use automatic check out, just as airlines are beginning to use internet or automatic check in. You don't need to talk to anyone the whole time you are doing your transaction. Banking can be done by ATM machines in just a few moments. We can run over to our neighbor's and borrow something in no time at all.

It was not the same in Costa Rica. The chicken, eggs, and bread were each sold in different stores, and it was important to take time to chat a little with each clerk who served you. At that time cashing a check involved standing in two lines: one to process your ID, and one to get your cash. Once again, it was important to talk at least briefly with each teller. It would have been rude to spend less than 20 minutes to half an hour visiting with your neighbor before you actually borrowed the book and took it home. So what took 45 minutes in the U.S. might take all morning or longer in Costa Rica.

Was the Costa Rican system a good one? It all depends on your goal. If you want to get as many errands done in as little time as possible, then their system ranks pretty low. However, Costa Rican society places a high value on relationships, on connectedness. If your goal is to establish and deepen relationships, their system works quite well. The typical Costa Rican probably feels a sense of connectedness with far more people than the typical American does.

So everything depends upon your goal or purpose. Jesus knew what he was doing with the Canaanite woman, just as he knows what he is doing with us. He had a purpose. He was going to draw this woman to himself and to bless her. So let's take a look at how he established a relationship with her, and how he might want to do the same thing with us.

There are a few things about the culture of that time we will need to understand if we are going to make sense out of this incident. For one, we need to know that it was out of character for a Canaanite woman to seek out a Jew. The Canaanites were hated enemies whom the Jews had defeated centuries before when they first entered the Promised Land. Although the Jewish and Canaanite homelands overlapped and they lived in the same area, they had as little to do with each other as possible.

But this woman was at the end of her rope. She was desperate to get her daughter healed. She may have taken the girl to Canaanite priests or exorcists, but her daughter was still demon possessed. She had nowhere else to turn. Her goal had nothing to do with coming to know Jesus. But if he could heal her daughter, she was willing to give him a try.

Have you been in the nightmarish situation of having a child, husband, wife, or other loved one who is suffering and you can do nothing to help? The battle might have been with cancer, or heart disease, or alcoholism, or mental illness; you might have been standing by helplessly as they went bankrupt or their marriage fell apart. And there was nothing you could do. You know what the Canaanite woman was facing.

If you have not lived such an experience, you must have seen the pictures during famines of mothers, weak with hunger, using their last ounce of strength to obtain food for their children. The Canaanite woman was like one of them. And she cries out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.”

The phrase “Son of David” was a term for the Messiah, the savior that the Jews were waiting for. It was a very strange phrase for this woman to use. The Canaanites weren’t Jewish. They weren’t waiting for the Messiah. It would be like me trying to impress a Tibetan Buddhist monk by saying, “Oh holy reincarnated one, help me!” This woman probably didn’t even believe in a messiah, but somehow she had heard about Jesus’ healing power, and she was willing to try anything. Jesus was the means to an end, a way to get her daughter healed. But Jesus had other plans for her.

I think we would agree that this passage is embarrassing for us as Christians. We tell people that if they call out to Jesus he will always respond to them, but in this case he just ignores the poor woman. Then it gets worse. He compares her with a dog, the insulting word that the Jews used for everybody who wasn’t Jewish. If he really wanted to draw her into a relationship with himself, it does not look like he was off to a very good start.

Now the Canaanite woman for her part would have felt extremely awkward around a bunch of Jews, and especially around a rabbi. If you have ever had to be someplace where you knew you were not welcome, you understand

what she was facing. She would never have been there if it weren't for her daughter's situation.

She probably had figured that no rabbi, and certainly no so-called messiah, would speak to a Canaanite woman. I suppose the best she hoped for was what sometimes happens today to street people when they ask for bus money or food money. Most people pretend not to hear them, or shake their heads and keep walking. But if they ask enough people, every so often someone will give them a couple of quarters. No conversation, no eye contact, just give them some change with as brief a contact as possible. The street person is generally not looking for a relationship. Their goal is bus money. And often the goal of the giver is to get away from the street person. The fastest way to get rid of people is to give them what they want.

Apparently that is what the disciples were expecting when they told Jesus to send the woman away. Just give her what she wanted, and she would stop bothering them. So now we have three competing goals. The disciples wanted not to be bothered. The woman wanted her daughter healed. But Jesus wanted to know this woman, and wanted her to know him. And strangely enough, the best way to get to know her, to reach his goal, was to say nothing at all.

His silence forced her to make a decision. Was she going to stick around, or was she going to give up? She stuck around. And if we follow this conversation carefully, we will see that something has changed. We already noted that at first she called Jesus, "Son of David." Was she trying to impress him with what she knew about him? Was she trying to pressure him to come through, to heal her daughter to show that he really was the Messiah? We don't know.

But when he said that he was sent to the lost sheep of Israel, he was telling her the truth. As a Canaanite, she had no claim on the Messiah. He was under no obligation to pay attention to her. But she has begun to see something about him. It was ok. She didn't have to be an insider. No more pressuring him with "Son of David." Now it was just, "Lord, help me." That was enough.

Jesus' response about the food and the dogs sounds horrible to us, but it would not have sounded quite so bad to her for a couple of reasons. The Jews sometimes thought of heaven in terms of a feast with the Messiah,

God's chosen one. They called it the Messianic banquet. And although they saw the banquet as primarily for their own people, they also believed that some non-Jews would be able to share the overflow. This woman lived in a mixed Jewish-Gentile area, and she had enough contact with Jews to know what Jesus was referring to. There was a place for her at the Messianic banquet table, or at least under the table. She knew that Jesus was actually opening a way for her to argue her point.

Jesus also did something subtle, that the woman did not miss. When Jews spoke of the Gentiles as dogs, they used a word that meant wild dogs, dogs that roamed the streets and ate garbage. We used to see that kind of dog in Venezuela, and they were scary and repulsive. We kept away from them.

But when Jesus calls this Canaanite woman a dog, he uses the word for house dogs, for pets. Some Bible translations have captured the idea by using doggies, or puppies. When Jesus used that gracious change of vocabulary, the woman knew that she had won her case. Maybe she wasn't one of the children of Abraham, but she still had a claim on the kindness and affections of Jesus—not because of how good she was, but because of how good he was, and is.

When she came to him just throwing herself on his mercy, not trying to pressure him or manipulate him, then Jesus, God the Son, was more than delighted to grant her request.

Do you see what happened to this woman and how Jesus responded? If her daughter had always been healthy, if life had proceeded smoothly for her, maybe she would have been vaguely aware that some of the Jews were excited about this wonder-worker named Jesus. But she needed her daughter's trauma in order to begin seeking him for herself.

And as she sought him, she hoped that Jesus would give her what she wanted immediately so that she could get away and get back to her daughter. But if he had, she would have known nothing more about Jesus than she did at the beginning. He wanted her heart. He wanted her to know him for who he was. That was going to take some time.

And so she ended up actually having a conversation with God the Son. He had listened to her. He had considered her argument. She had won him over to her side, and he in turn had won her over. She achieved her original goal

of her daughter's healing, but she received much more as well. And none of it would have happened if she hadn't faced a horrible situation with her daughter, or if she had given up too soon, or even if Jesus had responded to her request too quickly.

And of course the blessing spread beyond just the woman and her daughter. Once the Canaanite woman arrived home and had gotten over the excitement of embracing her daughter, I bet she could hardly stop talking to her friends, her neighbors, and her family about her amazing encounter with the Son of David. They, in turn, would have needed to begin rethinking their old prejudices against the Jewish people and against the God of the Jews. If Jesus came to their region again, they would have felt bold to approach him as well. And the blessing would have spread.

So Jesus' method was not very efficient as far getting people healed as quickly as possible and on their way, but it worked very well to achieve his goal of entering into relationship with the woman.

As we understand what was going on in Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman, it is going to unscramble some of the mystery in our own relationship with him. He is consistent. He desires the same depth of relationship with us that he had with this woman. And given our human nature, he knows that it will not be easy to get our attention.

I think Jesus would love to relate to us before we get desperate, but he knows what we are like. He would love to grant our requests quickly, but he knows that we are unlikely to stick around. If you ask around at church, you will find that many people first came to faith through some traumatic event in their lives. Others will say that their times of greatest spiritual growth came when they were forced to draw near to God because they had no place else to go. Jesus reaches out in whatever way is necessary to draw us to himself. It will take time. He will not force himself on us. But if we hold on tight, we end up not only blessed, but sharing that blessing with others.

We have opportunities to hold on tight to Jesus as a congregation as well. Some of you remember the badly overcrowded Sunday School, and God's provision for the funds for the Christian education building over forty years ago. More of you remember the pain when two of our pastors in a row faced devastating illnesses that led to their early deaths. Our denomination's recent

stance in favor of same sex marriage may lead to some tense confrontations and painful decisions. It may not get resolved quickly.

Whether at a personal or a congregational level. Jesus' goal is the same. He continues to say, "Don't give up. It may seem to you that I am not responding, but I am. It may seem that things are moving far too slowly, or even in the wrong direction, but they aren't. Your goal may be to get your problem solved. My goal is to draw you close to me until you know who I am, until you receive the blessing I have for you, until you become more like me, and you are able to share the blessing with others. Don't give up on me, because I surely will not give up on you."

Let us pray.