

## The Consolations of God Matthew 15:21-28

### Matthew 15:21-28

<sup>21</sup>Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

<sup>22</sup>Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” <sup>23</sup>But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.”

<sup>24</sup>He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” <sup>25</sup>But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.”

<sup>26</sup>He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

<sup>27</sup>She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

<sup>28</sup>Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

### The Sermon

“Blessings in these strange times.”

In the first half of this year, I probably signed off about a thousand emails with that phrase or something like it. Wasn’t it kind of amazing how quickly it became a cliché for all of us who produce newsletters, public statements, commercials, and other kinds of communications to start off by saying, “These are strange times”?

A couple weeks into it, you could practically see the thought balloons above people's heads as they would open up mail or magazines or laptops, read the words, "These are strange times," and think to themselves, "Thank you for that illuminating information. I believe I have now absorbed the idea that these are strange times."

Somewhere along the line, I got fed up with hearing myself describe both the circumstances and our responses to them as happening "in real time," as if there were some other category. And I still call things "unprecedented," even though the number of times people have used the word "unprecedented" lately is, er, unprecedented.

And it's within the unprecedented context of these strange times that the dramas and melodramas of life still take place.

We take the bitter with the sweet, recognizing with gratitude the joys, and the beauties, moments of contentment, satisfaction, and reward, even as we endure and absorb losses, sadnesses, farewells, frustrations, painful misunderstandings, and injuries to body, mind and soul.

A few months ago a meme started circulating that said, "I'm finished with 2020. Let's just put up the Christmas tree and call it a year."

So what do we have to say to the world when it feels like everything is a bit off kilter—or maybe way off kilter?

Maybe more to the point: What message of reassurance or consolation do you need to be told by someone with the credibility for you to take it seriously and the authority to make it real, at a time when both credibility and authority are at a low ebb?

What do you need, right now, to hear Jesus say to you? Or, maybe "need" is a loaded word. What do you long to hear from him?

The three words that I find most poignant in Matthew’s story of the Canaanite mother come when she’s saying, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon,”

and the disciples are saying, “Will you get her out of here? we’re being tormented by her,”

and Jesus says—and it’s not clear whether he’s answering her, or the disciples, or I like to think he was thinking out loud and muttering to himself—“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,”

and she comes and kneels and says: “Lord, help me.”

What do you, right now, most want to hear Jesus say to you?

Phillips Brooks was the rector of Trinity Church in Boston for a long stretch in the late 1800s. Early in his ministry he wrote a sermon called “The Consolations of God.” He said—and this is over 150 years ago—that for people who have all the energy in the world, healthy and vital, and everything is laid out for them to succeed and in place for them to soar, you don’t go up to them and go, “Come, here is God who consoles men. Give yourself to him.”<sup>i</sup>

They’re not going to hear that; he said it’s like being handed a lit candle in broad daylight before you go into a deep cavern. It means nothing in the daylight. But go into the catacombs, and the further you go into the dark, that lit candle means more and more.<sup>ii</sup>

It’s when our youthful vitality starts to give way, and our knees grow weak;

when the world becomes a place we don’t know anymore, and feels broken and rudderless; when it feels like nobody’s in charge, and you can hardly tell the in-depth analysis from the crackpot conspiracy theory,

when there's something out there that's trying to kill us, and people can't even agree on whether or not to protect each other without it turning into a nasty political debate;

when the Presbyterian elder's vow to maintain peace, unity and purity produces a Venn diagram that cannot find a common center because one person's purity is another's antagonizing alienation, and peace seems awfully hard to come by;

And all of that comes at a time when we're tired of being inside all the time, tired of masks, tired of working harder and with greater intensity but feeling like a hamster on a wheel;

and for those whose homes have become their offices, it's like you never really made it into work, *and* you never get to leave the office;

and we can't see our families and friends like we used to—can't meet for breakfast or lunch or dinner or a long coffee morning or a late cheerful evening; can't even worship like we've always been able to worship:

then, said Phillips Brooks, then is when you bring out this part of the gospel, the Good News that is the incarnate Jesus, the transcendent God:

That's when you remember, when you turn back to what you know, when you speak in hushed and grateful tones about the comforter, the advocate, the Holy Spirit, the loving face and hands and voice of Jesus, "the God of repair, the God of consolation, the God who takes the broken life into his hands and mends it."<sup>iii</sup>

The reality of God's presence, the truth of God's specific care for you and me and each human being, the gifts of enlightenment and spirituality and a sense of the eternal, the feeling of God actively doing something in your life, surrounding you with holiness—Phillips Brooks called these "the consolations of God."<sup>iv</sup>

And speaking of putting up the Christmas tree and calling it a year, it is probably not coincidence that Phillips Brooks is best known today as the writer of “O Little Town of Bethlehem”—

“Yet in thy dark streets shineth  
the everlasting light;  
the hopes and fears of all the years  
are met in thee tonight.”

They were a family from the district of Tyre and Sidon, two coastal towns on the Mediterranean Sea, north of where most of the action is in the gospels. Whether the Dad was around, or employed, or disabled, or even still living, it was the Mom who made her way out to Jesus.

Who can dare to imagine what terrors had happened in that home to give them every indication that the daughter was not just sick, but was being tormented, and not just by genetic dysfunction or random circumstance, but by what felt for all the world like there was an evil intent behind it?

A few years ago when Vivian and Betsy Ray and I were able to take a few days and respond to a request for help from the Presbytery of West Virginia after catastrophic flooding, we heard an older local resident say, in the midst of miles of utter devastation, “We’ve had flooding before, and you deal with it when it comes. But this one felt mean.”

So the Mom, in the utter desperation of a helpless parent of a daughter being tormented by an unknowable force far beyond the reach of medicine or the healing comforts of home, hears or sees or just intuits that Jesus is coming through, and she comes racing out to beg for healing from her only remaining hope.

Meanwhile, Jesus and the disciples are coming from their own drama. Tom Long says it about as well as it can be said:

“Fresh from his confrontation with the Pharisees and the Scribes (Matthew 15:1-20), Jesus heads out for the far borders of Israel, northwest toward Gentile territory...

Out there in the borderlands, he is suddenly approached by a local woman noisily appealing on behalf of her daughter, a victim of demon possession. In Mark’s Gospel, this woman is described simply as ‘a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin’ (Mark 7:26), but Matthew ups the stakes by calling her ‘a Canannite’—thereby identifying her with the Old Testament enemies of Israel...

“It is difficult to overstate the drama here... This encounter...is situated in every way ‘on the border’—on the boundary between the old and the new, between male and female, between Jew and Gentile, between friend and enemy, between the holy and the demonic.”<sup>v</sup>

Jesus said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help *me*.”

He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

It’s *kind of* like Jesus says, “These lives matter,” and it’s *kind of* like she says, “All lives matter.”

And he says, the point here, though, is that I am here within the specific historical arc of these, my people, into whom I was born and about whom I am: these oppressed people, with both the history and the present, existential reality of being at various times enslaved, occupied, subjugated, ignored, trampled and dismissed.

And she says, “Yes, you are. But your healing is the healing that can make a difference. *You are salvation*, and my family and I may be outside of your family, but we need your salvation—we need you—just as much as your family does.”

She doesn’t deny that he is here as the messiah of the Covenant People—that this is about the Covenant People. That he is about, and is part of, the story, the metanarrative, of the Covenant People.

And he doesn’t exclude her and her daughter from that story.

It’s not that in this conversation he has suddenly become a generic messiah *without* a story. It’s that he has opened the door for someone who is outside of that story to come inside of that story, and find refuge, and be healed.

And Jesus said to her, “Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

And her daughter was healed instantly.

“The God of repair, the God of consolation, the God who takes the broken life into his hands and mends it.”<sup>vi</sup> This is what the consolations of God look like.

The steadying, strengthening reality of God’s presence in all circumstances.

The breathtaking truth that the same God who made this and any other conceivable or inconceivable universe specifically cares for you, and for me, and for every human being.

The equipping gifts Jesus brings regular people like you and me: gifts of enlightenment and spirituality and a sense of the eternal.

The feeling of God actively doing something in your life, surrounding you with holiness—healing, curing, consoling, opening doors, welcoming outsiders in and sending disciples out.

Jesus interacts with people both inside and outside of his own, even as he reaffirms that his story is rooted in the story of that specific family—that beleaguered, scattered, impoverished family who carry a living memory of enslavement and are still treated by the entitled, consciously or not, as less than fully human.

Jesus does not always offer an immediate answer, or even an immediate acknowledgement, to even the most desperate prayers. But he always brings healing and he never withholds the love of God.

He listens and responds to people that his own closest followers counsel him to dismiss.

He takes note of and celebrates people's faith.

And he brings—and he is—healing.

What do you most want Jesus to say to you or do for you right now?

And what will you say and do in response?

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<sup>i</sup> Phillips Brooks, "The Consolations of God," in Ellen Wilbur, ed., *The Consolations of God: Great Sermons of Phillips Brooks* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 71

<sup>ii</sup> Brooks, "Consolations," 71-72

<sup>iii</sup> Brooks, "Consolations," 71

<sup>iv</sup> Whether Brooks's sermon still reads convincingly as a piece of theology is, of course, a subjective matter; I have updated some of his language—though not too much—so as not to miss the point or be distracted by tangents.

<sup>v</sup> Tom Long, *Matthew* (Westminster Bible Companion series. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 174

<sup>vi</sup> Brooks, "Consolations," 71