

Revolutionary Mothering

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[0 : 00] All right. So the first thing that I want to say this morning is that for me today, this is going to be a little bit of a different sermon. If you know me, you know that I like to keep things very polished when I preach. I taught lit and composition and all those years of marking up papers, I'm always thinking about that with my sermons. I like to be perfectly organized.

I like to be literary. I like the right words in the right order, which is one definition of poetry. It's probably my favorite definition of poetry. But today I'm not going to have quite as much of that polish. And while I want to tell you it's because I'm some great experimental preacher who is like always experimenting with the craft, it's because I was sick for the last 10 days, okay? And I'm still recovering and still physically kind of coming back into myself. So I was basically forced out of my perfectionism. But as a black mother, I do have a lot of thoughts about Mother's Day, a lot of conflicting thoughts about Mother's Day as a queer person creating queer family. And so I definitely did not want to let that kind of sickness stop me. So I'm going to share a few thoughts and your gift to me on this Mother's Day can be grace. I also want to start by saying that we are moving in the next four weeks or so, five weeks into the series, that it's going to explore God across gender. We at the table tend to use a multiplicity of pronouns for God, she, they, et cetera. And it feels like that Mother's Day is a really good time to start to move into like why we do that theologically, how do we think about that scripturally. There are all these ways that scripture depicts are all these ways in which scripture depicts God, father, shepherd, potter.

You could go on and on forever thinking about these images. And often what happens is that we take these things that are metaphor and we make them literal. One of my favorite, actually two of my favorite definitions of metaphor. Here's one of them. A metaphor is seeing one thing as something else, pretending that this is that, because we do not know how to talk about that or this.

[2 : 43] We don't know how to talk about it, so we use another way. We look at it kind of through the corner of our eyes. Metaphors are divinely given means to avoid idolatrous claims of knowledge. They are an acknowledgement that we need to access the world around us in an indirect fashion. And that the idea of direct and complete access is an arrogant illusion that violates the multifaceted integrity of creation. So those are two ways of thinking about metaphor from two scholars I like. So for the next several weeks, we're going to use some different metaphors for God and explore some different stories that I think will help us think about God across gender that will be helpful for both our theology and our kind of walking around in the world sociology.

So today I'm going to go to this text that kind of fascinates me, kind of scares me, and that is not often lifted up on Mother's Day, so see how this goes. But it is, I actually want to look at two versions of it, Matthew 15. It's a troubling story, and we're going to look at Matthew's version of it and Mark's version of it. Often I like to focus on one version because authors, each author, biblical author, is doing something different. But because there are some like really gorgeous variations in these two stories that I think reveal some wider truth, I want to look at them both. And they're both relatively short. So here's Matthew 15, 21 through 28. Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre in Sidon. 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. 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. 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. 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 master's table. Then Jesus answered her, woman, great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish. And her daughter was healed instantly. So a few things about this story that stand out and are of note, just

basic things. One, Jesus is in this area with his disciples of Tyre and Sidon. He goes to these areas that are two kind of wealthy port cities that are north of Galilee, where most of his ministry takes place.

There are some predominantly Jewish enclaves in Tyre and Sidon, but mostly these are Gentile areas. Also really interesting in this first story is that the woman is identified as Canaanite.

[6 : 12] She's this Canaanite woman who is shouting. This is the only time in the New Testament that word Canaanite is used. It's basically an anachronism during the time of Jesus.

It points out this woman's otherness, that these were the enemies, that she is somehow attached to the enemies of the perceived, of the Israelites. Her lineage is through former enemies.

As one person puts this, the word Canaanite marks her as someone who is to be invaded and conquered. It basically intensifies her otherness. You don't get her name, but you know that she's a Canaanite.

She's a woman. She's a Gentile among them. She's intensely other. And she's shouting. And from that shouting, we learn that she is a mother. Have mercy on me, son of David. My daughter is tormented by a demon.

Jesus, at first, seems to ignore her. And the disciples do sometimes what many of us have experienced. They talk about her right in front of her. They're like, this bothersome, noisy, too loud woman. You need to send her away.

[7 : 29] She's disrupting what we're about. And then finally, Jesus does address her and says that his mission does not extend to her people.

But the mother relentlessly persists in the story. She keeps, she stays in the game. And then Jesus says a thing that this passage is known for.

Probably the most disturbing thing. It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. There's some evidence. This is debated, but that in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, that dogs was a slur for Gentiles.

This idea is that the idea is that Jesus is teaching or Jesus is healing. Jesus is kingdom is not for her. But she comes back with this clever reply.

Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table. She uses the insult as a way to point out that she is indeed deserving.

[8 : 40] It's a troubling piece of scripture. Because Jesus seems to use this ethnic slur to debase somebody that possibly is already marginalized.

I also really struggle with this passage because there's a sense that she is content with crumbs. And for me, as somebody who's, you know, been told, you know, been given the impression that they should be content with crumbs, I kind of hate that she's like, okay, I'll take crumbs.

But then at the end of the story, it ends with, great is your faith, and the woman's daughter is healed. That's the story on the face of it. Now let's go to the other version of this story, also pretty short, and I'm going to read that one.

And as you listen along with me or read along with me, consider how this one is different. From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there, yet he could not escape notice.

But a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile of Syrophenician Origen. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

[9 : 59] He said to her, let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. But she answered him, sir, even the dogs on the table eat the children's crumbs.

Then he said to her, for saying that, you may go. The demon has left your daughter. So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. So this is a different version, a different take.

And in this story you get a much more accurate descriptor of who the woman is. She's a Syrophenician background. There's a sense that Jesus is more open, because the idea is that there's just a chronological priority on the people of Israel, and then it will go.

Like, that's more explicit in this text. And then my favorite part is that this one, this version, ends with, for saying this, you may go. And then the daughter is healed.

So even though this story is troubling, scholars are fascinated, lots of feminist and womanist theologians are fascinated with the story, on this Mother's Day, I want to suggest that we are invited to follow the example of this relentless mother through really three things.

[11:19] Our struggle, our sass, and our efforts at solidarity. So first, the most basic thing to notice about these stories is that this is a woman who, like, she stays in the game.

She is in the arena. She is like, you will not send me away. She is not afraid of struggle. She doesn't give up in the face of what seems like a completely closed door.

She doesn't give up in the face of this prevailing theology, this absolutist theology that she seems to be faced with. She struggles. She wrestles using her words and her wit.

She doesn't become resigned to the way that things are. She also doesn't curse God, which is interesting. She doesn't walk away. She stays.

And Jesus seems to consider that faith. And I really love that, because I think that often when we think about faith, it tends to be submissive.

[12:27] It tends to be obedient. It's not something that's about pushback. But here you see that pushback is faith. Wits and cleverness is faith.

This mother struggles, and it reminds us that we, too, can struggle, can stay in the game, even in the face of theologies that we just mason the rest of our lives grappling with.

And in this mother, she doesn't just struggle and turn her ear by struggling. There's also this sense that it is because of her sass that Jesus, like, she's victorious in the argument.

So Mark's version says, for saying this, you may go. And I love this. See, when I was growing up, I can remember older people warning me not to be sassy.

Don't be sassy. While at the very same time, admiring people who could sass well. Sass is subversive. Sass is resistance language.

[13:41] It usually comes from people who have very little power beyond a few words that are gotten in. If you're a kid, before you get whipped. Before the door slams in your face.

Sometimes before the authorities are sent in. Sass is arguing. Wanting more information than you are supposed to have.

Asking too many questions. Being uncooperative. Refusing to be dismissed. There's a great article about this by womanist theologian Mitzi J. Smith.

It's called Race, Gender, and the Politics of Sass. If you want to check that out. And in it, she explains that sass is slang created in the context of patriarchal, genderized, and racialized society. It's talking back. And that's what this mother does. She talks back. She uses the weapons that she has. Her tongue. And if you don't remember anything else, I have to admit that this is probably the one thing I want you to take away.

[14:52] It's that trading in the language of respectability, like trading that in, letting that go for the sake of words of sassing toward justice, sass can be very holy work.

Very holy work. Okay. So the mother struggles. The mother uses sass. And then I want to say that she also reminds us to lean into the work of solidarity.

solidarity. This is a troubling story, but it's also a really surprising story when you really get into it.

One thing that helps me make sense of this story, that I think it's important for us to hold in mind in terms of context, is that the cities where Jesus is, these cities of Tyre and Sidon, a large part of their food would have come from the work of Galilean peasantry.

While the peasants in Galilee grew the food and sent it north, they themselves were often living lives of subsistence. The Galileans very possibly, like many folks in our world today in the same situation, potentially felt resentment at their powerlessness.

And when I read this story, I'm reminded of how human Jesus was. It's easy to forget that Jesus was this colonized man subject to daily injustice, the daily injustice of Rome and the injustice of the world in general.

[16:26] And he might have had some feelings about that. So perhaps part of his comment expresses anger and resentment at this place that this woman is from.

Maybe expresses a little bit of a sense of humiliation that Jesus might have felt at his own people being powerless, the Galilean peasantry being powerless.

And maybe that's why the mother in this story doesn't resist the harsh language of Jesus. Maybe she identifies with the peasants of Galilee and doesn't really see herself as a target of Jesus' words.

She's a mother. There are no men around her in the story, so she could be a single mother, which in that society was like destitution for sure.

Caring for the sick child. And for those reasons, maybe she sees herself not as a part of these wealthy cities, but maybe she casts her lot more, sees herself more in the struggles of the powerless, these Galilean folks.

[17 : 41] Maybe her challenge to Jesus then isn't simply about crumbs. Maybe she reminds Jesus that the struggles of his people extend to other people too.

Maybe she agrees with the mission that first should go to Jesus' own people out of solidarity with their place in the world.

Maybe she does say, it's okay not to prioritize these wealthy cities in your proclamation of the good news to the poor, but don't forget that they are poor beyond your own people.

And I wonder as I read this too if there's something about her mediating day in and day out for her daughter that opens her up to this greater solidarity.

So I think that we are invited to follow this mother in struggle and in sass and through solidarity. But the story also makes me consider how deeply we need to expand our notions of motherhood.

[19 : 00] I've never listened to a sermon on this, heard a sermon on this text that really focused on this woman as a mother. And maybe that's because she doesn't really conform to some of our stereotypical ideals of motherhood.

I can remember when I was growing up, we had Barbies. I always wanted the Kins.

There's no surprise there. I always wanted to play Kin in the situations that I was in. And if there was a family play situation, I always wanted to be the father.

And I look back on that and I realize that, yes, I mean, there's a lot of stuff going on in terms of gender and sexuality. Okay, yes. But I also realize that my idea of being a mother was all about submissiveness and obedience.

There was nothing in it that was adventurous or radical. And I was a kid. I wanted what was adventurous and what was radical. But now I realize that the best kinds of mothering, there's nothing passive about them.

[20 : 17] That nurturing a child into freedom, as June Jordan put it, that growing unpredictable people, as Alexis Pauline Gumbs puts it, is revolutionary work.

If you think, as I did, that celebrating mothering celebrates the status quo, then you've forgotten about the mothering of black women and native women and immigrant women who have defied every supremacist agenda to raise children who were never meant to survive.

And thus, we're creating futures that were never meant to be. Idealized motherhood has been reserved so often for people with privilege, while the rest of us who do genuine mothering have been often left out.

mothering, but mothering, I now realize, is so much more expansive than I ever knew, ever imagined. Here's Gumbs in her book, *Revolutionary Mothering*.

Mothering is worked by chosen and accidental mentors who agree to support some growing, unpredictable thing called future.

[21 : 44] Mother is worked by house mothers in ball culture who provide spaces of self-love and expression for or as queer youth of color in the street.

What would it mean for us to take the word mother less as a gendered identity and more as a possible action? A technology of transformation that those people who do the most mothering labor are teaching us right now.

And I want to say if you identify as a man in this room, there are lots of examples in scripture of men mothering. I am one of those people who thinks men often mother.

I think of Paul describing himself as a nursing mother. The number of times he talks about milk as if he's a wet nurse. And I think it's pretty clear that God mothers.

You get these glimpses of that in places like Isaiah. For example, in Isaiah 42, for a long time I have held my peace. I have kept still and restrained myself.

[22 : 55] Now I will cry out like a woman in labor. I will gasp and pant. This is a birthing mother. Or later in Isaiah, can a mother forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb?

God mothers. We got to talk more about that. So I know that as I wrap up, mothering is a hard topic.

It's in many ways a hard topic for me too. But I want to say that if you are a biological mother in this room, happy Mother's Day. Pamper yourself.

I want some pampering too. You know, all of that. I don't want to downplay that reality. So there's something that Cole Arthur Riley wrote in *Black Liturgies* that I love.

On this day, Mother's Day, we're reminded that we do not begin with ourselves. So when we think about where we come from, there's that reality.

[23 : 55] Our beauty, our pain do not exist in a vacuum, but they are tethered to those who came before us. We are more than us. And Mother's Day can help us behold that reality.

Whether that reality is beautiful or complex or that we didn't begin ourselves. I think it can help us reflect on the role of biological and chosen mothers.

That's really important work. But I also think there are so many people who are doing the work of mothering in other ways. So if you saw me in the hall, you said happy Mother's Day to me, and I was like, happy Mother's Day, and you're like, okay.

It's because I often, like, so many people are doing this kind of work and I want us to remember that on a day like this as well, that we all in some ways need to also take our rest on days like this.

That regardless of how it shows up, mothering folks into the future is holy work. Creating toward the future and nurturing over and over again toward the future is holy work.

[25 : 06] So I think that all of us, regardless of how we mother, I think that we have good news today. That God accepts our struggles in faith.

That God accepts our sassing toward justice. And that God accepts our efforts at solidarity. I think that's what the model of this woman teaches us, this mother that is unnamed.

And I think that God herself will somehow be faithful to transform all of that struggling and all of that sassing and all of that day in and day out work of solidarity into healing and into wholeness.

I think that's your love for us. Amen. Guys, please, give it tomorrow. ■ have