

BREAKING BOUNDARIES

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Matthew 15:21-28

How long has it been since a human being set foot on the moon? It has been 51 years. The last year that a person walked on the moon was 1972. Between the 1969 Apollo 11 mission and the 1972 Apollo 17 mission, only 12 people actually landed on the moon's surface. But apparently, we are going back.

In 2024, NASA's Artemis II mission is scheduled to carry a crew of four to circle the moon, but not land. The next planned landing is the Artemis III mission which is scheduled for 2025.

Human beings have long endeavored to break the boundaries of our planet and explore beyond our atmosphere, reaching out into the unknown. For two decades, starting in 1955, the U.S. and its Cold War rival the USSR were locked in a competition to see who could achieve superior space flight capabilities. This competition was known as the Space Race.

The USSR got off to a fast start by being the first to put a satellite into orbit. That was 1957 and the satellite was known as Sputnik. They were also the first to put a human into orbit. Yuri Gagarin circled the earth in 1961 before returning safely. This led President Kennedy to raise the stakes and establish a program to put an American on the moon and bring that person home safely. We achieved this goal in 1969 when Neil Armstrong made that one giant leap.

Today, we find ourselves in a Space Race with the Chinese. Their plan is to build a manned scientific research station on the moon's south pole. This is strategically significant because it is believed that there may be water at the south pole. If humans plan to travel to Mars, then the moon will serve as a base station for these launches. Water would be a critical compound for the fuel needed for the trip to Mars. The U.S. wants to make sure that China does not claim this part of the moon for itself.

I mention all of this because today marks the anniversary of a unique moment in the Cold War Space Race. It was on August 20, 1960, that Belka and Strelka safely returned to Earth from space. Who were Belka and Strelka? They were dogs—Russian dogs.

Now, these were not the first animals to go into space. The first were some fruit flies sent up by the U.S. in 1947 to research the effects of radiation and anything else deadly that might be found outside the boundaries of the Earth's atmosphere. Other animals were launched into space including a monkey named Albert. But these early missions were all suborbital—a simple up and down trip.

The first animal to actually orbit the earth was a Russian dog named Laika. Laika was sent up on the Sputnik 2 satellite just a few months after Sputnik I. But because there was no reentry plan for that mission, Laika died in space.

The first animals to return alive were the two dogs Belka and Strelka. However, they were not alone on their trip. They were accompanied by a rabbit, 40 mice, two rats, and 15 bottles of fruit flies. But Belka and Strelka were the stars of the mission. Upon their return to Earth, the two were retired and lived luxurious lives as the most famous dogs in Russia. One of Strelka's puppies was presented as a gift to President and Mrs. Kennedy by the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. That dog was named Pushinka (which in Russian means “fluffy”), and it lived at the White House.

I mention Belka and Strelka because our reading from the Gospel of Matthew talks about dogs. In the Space Race, dogs were used as test subjects because they were viewed as expendable—less valuable than humans. In fact, the Russian scientists used strays that they collected from the streets of Moscow. In the scripture, dogs are also regarded as inferior to people. To be called a dog was an insult.

In our reading from Matthew, Jesus and his disciples have left their home territory and traveled north into Phoenicia, to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Tyre and Sidon are two towns on the Mediterranean coast. They were about 35 miles north from Jesus' home in Capernaum—almost exactly the same distance as from here to the Kentucky border.

What is significant is that Jesus and the disciples have traveled outside the bounds of the Jewish lands of Israel and Judea and Galilee. Today, this area is the country of Lebanon. (There is always a Lebanon connection.) But in Jesus' day, it would have been Phoenicia.

While they are in this place, a woman approaches Jesus. She is described as being a Canaanite. This is an odd bit of information because at that time, Canaanites didn't really exist anymore as a people. Generations earlier, when the Jews escaped Egypt and first settled in the Promised Land, that place was inhabited by the Canaanites. The land was called the land of Canaan.

Throughout the Old Testament, the Canaanites were depicted as adversaries of Israel with warlike tendencies and their many pagan gods. The Jews did not regard the Canaanites as equals. As you will recall, Abraham sent his servant back to Abraham's homeland to locate a wife for his son Isaac so that Isaac would not marry a Canaanite woman. For the Gospel of Matthew to describe this woman who approaches Jesus as a Canaanite reinforces a centuries-old tension.

And she doesn't approach him peaceably. She shouts at him, saying, *Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.* This statement raises a lot of questions. First of all, how did this woman even know Jesus? How did she recognize him? They certainly didn't have photographs back then. How did she know that he could cast out demons? Had his fame spread that far?

She does know enough to address him as Lord. And more than that, she calls him Son of David, a term with powerful political overtones. To be a Son of David would recognize him as being in line for the throne—a throne taken away from Israel by the Roman occupiers. Also, the title Son of David has messianic implications. So, here we have this Canaanite woman calling Jesus Messiah before his disciples even see him that way.

This woman has a demand. She demands *mercy* and ask that Jesus cure her daughter who is possessed by a demon. She doesn't even have the afflicted girl with her, but she believes in Jesus' ability to heal—even long-distance healing.

But despite her shouting, Jesus is silent. He does not answer. He doesn't even respond. The disciples, on the other hand, tell Jesus to send this woman away because she is annoying them.

Jesus' next words are troubling to us. He says, *I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.* Now, it's not clear here if he's speaking to the disciples or to the woman when he says this. Is he telling the disciples "Don't worry. Just ignore her." Or is he saying to the woman, "I'm sorry, but I can't help you." He says that he is only sent to the lost sheep. *Lost sheep* reminds us of a shepherd. And the image of Jesus as a shepherd is a familiar one. And remember, King David himself started off as a shepherd.

If he is speaking to the disciples, it would seem to reinforce their view that their mission is only for their people—the children of Abraham, the flock of Israel. This would be consistent with their beliefs, and even their prejudices.

But it would seem especially cruel to reject this Canaanite woman by telling her that his mission is only to the people of Israel. She exists far outside the Israel's orbit.

In response, the woman kneels before Jesus and says, *Lord, help me.* We've got to give her credit. She is persistent. And she kneels because she views Jesus as a king.

Then Jesus says something that can only be interpreted as an insult. He calls the woman a dog. He tells her, *It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.* By children, he means the children of Abraham—God's people. Their food would be God's blessing. Dogs are those viewed as less worthy, as inferior. In

other words, Jesus seems to be saying, “It is not fair to take God's blessing and favor which is intended for God's children and toss it to the inferior Canaanites.”

I read this and I can't believe that Jesus would speak words that are so cruel. As a Christian, these words offend me. But the woman holds her own. She does not back down. And she responds, *Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.*

That's all she wants. A crumb. Not a banquet. She is not asking for the entirety of God's blessings, just a smidgen, and that is enough. She wants to be part of the household of God even if it is as the status of a dog. That is enough. She is willing to accept the scraps that fall from God's table. That is enough.

For how many of us would that actually be enough? How many of us would be willing to receive the crumbs off the communion table and say, “Thank you, Lord?” Or are we the ones who demand a feast when we come to the table? We want all that God has to give to be given to us. We certainly don't want an outsider to take any part of what we see as rightfully ours.

The disciples no doubt take pride in their status as children of Abraham, and they no doubt feel worthy of the full buffet of God's blessing. They no doubt wondered why Jesus has dragged them up into the land of the Canaanites when his responsibility was to the sheep of Israel. And when a Canaanite comes to them, they feel inconvenienced. They feel as if this woman is going to take what should be theirs.

But Jesus does not send the woman away. He acknowledges the strength of her faith and says to her, *Let it be done for you as you wish.* And we are told that her daughter was healed instantly.

And maybe this was Jesus' plan—to take the disciples beyond the boundaries of Israel and show them that his message is for all people, even Canaanites. One day, when he is gone, their job will be to continue to spread Jesus' message to the ends of the earth. Jesus is also teaching us that our mission is to share God's promise of love with all, even those we might look at as dogs.

What we discover is that this Canaanite woman—this unclean outsider—has a better grasp of Jesus' identity than the disciples do at this point. (It is not until the next chapter that Peter will confess that Jesus is the messiah.) Her encounter with Jesus raises unsettling questions of who is worthy of God's grace and who is not. Are there boundaries of God's love and does it reach all people? And might these people “out there” have a better understanding of faith than we do?

For us, this story should serve as a powerful reminder that God is not restricted to one people or one place. God is continually entering into new territories and

breaking boundaries. God does not call just a few. God offers a place for everyone at God's table.