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## The Syrophoenician Woman<sup>1</sup>

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### **Text: Matthew 15:21-28**

*(Note: I entered the pulpit wearing a blazer; just before I began, I took it off, turned it inside out, and put it back on.)*

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Anna, and I want to tell you about the day that changed my life. Turned it upside down and inside out, in fact. That's why I'm wearing this jacket inside out.

It's hard to explain. But the woman I met one day really had such an effect on me that I felt everything had been turned completely inside out. And ever since that day I've always worn at least one piece of clothing inside out. It may seem silly to you, but it's important to me. Often people ask me, "Why is your jacket inside out?" and then I tell them the story, you see; and if no one asks, it helps *me* remember.

Because it's not something I would ever want to forget. I'm glad Matthew wrote about that day so that people in every generation since then can read about it—as you just did this morning. If I had been writing it, I would have done it a bit differently, but, all in all, Matthew did a fine job. I feel I can say that because Matthew and I were friends.

I'm Anna, and I was one of Jesus' followers, a disciple of the man from Nazareth. I had heard him preach in my home town, and I saw how he cared about people, and how he treated them; how he didn't care about things that made a difference to others—like how much money you had, or whether you were from the right family, or even how religious you were. He just genuinely *cared*. And I felt, that day I heard him speaking about God, as though somehow in his eyes and in his touch and in his *being* God's very own presence was there. Among us. In him. Through him.

It's all so hard to explain, but others felt it, too, and we all became his followers. It was as though God the Creator, the Mystery that moves the sun and the stars, the Lord of Hosts, God Almighty, was somehow fully present in Jesus of Nazareth. And I felt drawn into the circle of those who sensed it too.

We followed him and listened; and he talked and talked to us and with us, listening, too, and hugging or touching when we needed reassurance. It wasn't always easy. His teachings were hard to understand sometimes, and when I *did* understand, it was often even harder because then I knew I had to *do* something about it.

But we were together, those of us on the inside, and that made it easier, somehow. More people were joining us every day, and it always made me feel good when someone new joined us to be able to help out, show them around, explain how we worked, this circle of ours. I had never felt that way before: secure, as though I really belonged. I was in charge of lodging. When we travelled from town to town—Jesus, the Twelve, and the rest of us—we had to stay somewhere at night, and I was in charge of that part of the arrangements. I felt very good about that—trusted, responsible. Jesus really had confidence in me! And to be in a group like that...well, it was the best thing that had ever happened to me!

Some of the men in the group resented me at times—in my day, women weren't often listened or talked to, never mind given positions of authority—but Jesus was always different that way. The other women and I were really part of that group. We were really on the *inside*. It was amazing! It was wonderful!

Well, that's how it went. Days of travelling and preaching and teaching, nights of talking and singing and laughing with Jesus. Always inviting more and more people inside.

And then came the day I will never forget.

Jesus had just finished talking to us about what it is that makes a person clean or unclean. Matthew wrote that down, too [15:1-20]. "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person," Jesus explained, "but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles....What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles."

The next thing we knew we were following him to Tyre. This was Gentile country, where they don't keep our religious rules *at all*. It was hard for me to choose a place for everyone to stay, and harder still for those who had to arrange for food. Our faith taught us certain things about washing before we ate, about what foods to eat, and how to prepare them. Many of our company were very faithful about that, and what Jesus had just said about clean and unclean now pulled us up short.

I was so confused, and I resolved to talk to Jesus about it before I made final arrangements about a place to sleep that night. I was on my way to do just that when it happened. He was standing in the centre of a small group, teaching. His back was to me. I saw a woman push her way through to where he was. I could see her face, but not his.

She was terrified. I could tell that by the look in her eyes. Terrified of what I couldn't tell. I could tell that she wasn't one of us; definitely not an Israelite, and when she spoke it was with a heavy accent. It wasn't often that a Gentile—a foreigner—broke into the centre of a group where a rabbi was teaching his disciples. Unheard of, really. No wonder she was afraid. She was also determined; I could see that. As though something stronger than fear were pushing her ahead.

As she drew closer I recognized her as a woman from the town we had just entered. Earlier in the day I had gone for a walk through the town to sort out Jesus' sayings about clean and unclean, when I happened upon a family argument. A woman—this woman—and her daughter. The daughter was, oh, maybe fourteen, and as defiant as children can be at that age. They were both screaming at each other, and finally the daughter had slammed the door and left. I had hurried off, too, embarrassed to be witnessing a private family quarrel, but not before I had seen the mother cover her face and begin to sob, cradling a doll that I guessed had belonged to the girl when she was a baby.

And now, here she was, seeking out Jesus. Her eyes betrayed her earlier tears, and there was at once incredible strength and a terrible fragility about the way she held her body.

As she stepped into the circle, some of the disciples backed away involuntarily; her clothes smelled of the food she had been cooking—foreign spices that were strange to us and foreign foods we had been taught were unclean.

She noticed them wrinkling their noses and backing away, but she steeled herself and kept on. You could see she'd expected that reaction—maybe our people had made her feel that way before. It hurt her, but she clenched her teeth (and her soul) and kept on. She spoke in our language, not her own, and her accent was heavy.

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David. My daughter is severely possessed by a demon.”

Her daughter? The one she'd fought with earlier? Whose doll she had clutched, weeping, as if remembering a time when the child loved and needed her? I kept listening. What would Jesus say?

I waited. A minute. Two. Three. It seemed forever. He didn't say a word! Not a word! It was horrible, the silence, like the silence before a storm or something even greater. She looked right at him the whole time. Her eyes never wavered. Still the silence. Finally, a few of those around him, embarrassed, closed the circle even tighter, and in a whisper asked Jesus to make her go away.

She stood her ground in the silence of that circle that tried to shut her out.

Then he spoke. And at first I thought I hadn't heard correctly.

"I was sent," he said slowly, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

The words stung me. They stung her too—I could see that; but now there was something else on her face—whatever it was, it gave her the courage to ask again.

"Lord, help me."

"It is not fair," his words came harshly, "to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."

I winced; but she seemed suddenly ready for him.

"Yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table!"

At that he burst out laughing! A surprised, delighted, appreciative laugh. He turned to her and touched her—a touch of admiration and respect—and spoke directly to her.

"Woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire!"

She thanked him, and they exchanged some comments I could not hear, and then she left. I watched her go, go through and beyond the fraying edges of the circle, and just as she was about to go out of my sight she fell into the amazed embrace of what looked very much like a fourteen year old girl who had been watching from a distance.

And that's my story. That's how it happened. I am still not sure exactly what happened, and I don't think I'll ever understand it all. But I know it was *very important*. Why had Jesus spoken so rudely to her? I asked some of my friends who were on the other side of the circle, facing Jesus. Some said that all the while he spoke he had a twinkle in his eye—as if he knew she liked to argue and was trying to coax it out of her, a debate, *rabbi to rabbi*, in the old style. Some said no, that he seemed to be saying, “Some of these folks here think I should minister only to the children of Israel and would call you a Gentile dog—what do you and I have to say to that?” Some said he was silent to see what his disciples would say and how they would react—to see if what he had just been teaching them about things clean and unclean would influence them, had really sunk in.

I don't know why he was silent, why he spoke as he did. But I do know this: I know that woman was incredibly brave. She was an outsider in every way, and it took her and her courage to teach us all a lesson. Where are the outsiders here? Where is *your* church, your closed little circle, being challenged and taught by those on the outside?

I urge you to listen and learn. Outsiders have much to teach you by their questions, their persistence, and their raw need. I encourage you to be aware of when your circle is becoming too closed and too tight. Thank God for those who, with brazen tenacity, push their way in and open it up. Whom are you keeping out? Maybe you need, as we did, a lesson from this woman about inside and outside. For me, she turned them around.

He called her a dog. I've noticed that women in your day are still called dogs (or a variation of that word) when they ask forthrightly for what they need. Thank God there are women who have not been beaten by the language that has been used to deny them personhood, that makes them trivial, invisible, and appendices to men. Thank God that there are those who have not given up and who stay, demanding from the body of Christ the integrity of its words and actions. They are the daughters of this woman.

Just one more thing. Whatever else my friends said Jesus' motives were that day, I believe that she taught *him* something by her forthrightness, her gumption, and her persistence. I believe she led him to see his mission in a new way, or to see in a concrete way what his mission meant. And he allowed himself to be taught—and he delighted in it! He laughed and enjoyed the new light she brought to the situation.

And this, I believe, is not evidence of his weakness or humanity, *but evidence, rather, of his divinity*. It was precisely Jesus' openness to this woman that is a mark of his divine nature, that makes him God-like.

A certain Sister Corita, who is part of your generation, once said that the most theological of all words is, "WOW!" Whatever words Jesus spoke to the woman afterwards, I am sure among other things he said, "Wow! You're right!" If he can say that in response to the insight of a poor, desperate, marginalized foreign woman, then the heart of Jesus is very close to the heart of God. Open. Changing. Profoundly responsive to need. Delighting in those who will challenge for justice.

So you see why I wear my jacket inside out today. It is to remind me always of the Syrophenician woman and what she taught us, and how she turned my ideas inside out. She also turned our tight little circle inside out because before we were always inviting others *inside* but never admitting that those who were "outside" might have something to teach.

And so, who really is on the inside and who is on the outside? I don't know anymore. And that's good. And that's God.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> Beverly Brazier comments, "When the Decade for Churches in Solidarity with Women began, I made a vow that whenever there was a woman in a passage [lectionary reading] I would focus on her." This sermon is one of that collection.