

Be Persistent!  
Matthew 15:21-28  
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Rev. Dr. Anne Dilenschneider

Tyre and Sidon were wealthy seaport cities about 20 miles apart from each other.  
They were located north of Israel in the place we know as Lebanon.  
And they had been in existence for at least 2,000 years  
by the time Jesus was born.  
We know this because a number of letters from the kings of Tyre and Sidon  
from as long ago as 1350 BCE still exist  
and 10 of these letters were sent to the Egyptian Pharaoh!  
These cities were so well known that  
Sidon is mentioned 17 times in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (~850 BCE)

Sidon was named for Noah's grandson (Gn 10:15),  
and, it was part of the land God promised to Israel (Jos 13:16)  
Sidon and Tyre sent cedar trees, carpenters, and stone masons to Jerusalem  
to build King David's palace;  
Sidon sent trees as well (2 Sam 5:11; 1 Chron 22:4)  
Hiram, the king of Tyre, also brought cedars down from the mountains  
and floated them down the Mediterranean coast to Joppa  
for Solomon's palace and the First Temple (1 Kings 5:8-11; 2 Chron 2:16),  
Later, when the Jews returned from captivity, they contacted the men of Sidon and Tyre  
for cedars to build the Second Temple.  
Again cedars were floated from Lebanon along the Mediterranean coast to Joppa,  
where they could be brought overland to Jerusalem (Ezra 3:7).  
The people of Tyre and Sidon had a long history with the people in Israel and Judah

Tyre and Sidon were also the source for purple dye, the symbol of royalty and wealth.  
This was because the area was rich in Murex, a type of mollusk,  
and it took the fluid from thousands of murex  
to produce just one ounce of purple dye.  
No wonder it was so expensive, and only used for royalty!  
So, the Greeks called this area "Phoenicia," from their Greek word for purple  
And the Phoenicians became known not only for their dye,  
but also for their shipbuilding  
and for their ability to ship the dye and other goods  
all over the Mediterranean.

Under the Greeks, the peoples of Sidon and Tyre  
had a fair amount of freedom and developed an advanced cultural life.  
Under the Romans, Sidon had its own senate and minted its own coins.  
Tyre became the capital of Rome's Syria-Phoenician province.  
These were wealthy Roman port cities.

We hear in the Gospels that “crowds” and “multitudes” of people from this well-to-do region come to hear Jesus (Mk 3:8) and come to be healed by him (Lk 6:17)

And, today, a woman comes.

Her daughter is sick.

She acknowledges Jesus as the Son of David

(even the disciples don't do this)

and asks Jesus for help.

The disciples want her to go away.

She calls Jesus “Lord”

(even the disciples don't do this)

and asks Jesus again for help.

And Jesus replies “It is not fair to take the children's food

and throw it to the dogs.”

She answers by saying, “Yes, Lord,” again.

And then she counters his position:

“yet even the dogs

eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.”

Then Jesus says, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

And Matthew tells us that her daughter was healed.

This talk of food may seem strange

but it is central to the history of this place

and to the Jewish and Christian understandings of the kingdom of God.

First of all, strangers have shared meals at this place before:

This is the place where God sent Elijah

during a terrible drought that had lasted for 3½ years

to an impoverished and destitute widow.

When Elijah asked her for food,

the widow fed Elijah

with a cake made of the very last bits of her oil and meal (1 Kings 17:9).

After that, her jar of meal and her jug of oil

did not run empty until after the rains came,

just as Elijah had promised.

And, soon after, when the widow's son died,

Elijah revived him.

This is a place where strangers share meals and lives are saved.

Now, faith is mentioned 275 times in the Bible,

but eating is mentioned 800 times. (Smith)

Any talk about food or meals in Scripture is always talk about theology . . .

about how we understand God and the reign of God!

And, according to Isaiah, the reign of God is fulfilled when everyone gathers at one great table, coming from the north, south, east, and west.

God is the one “who gathers the outcasts . . .

and others to them, besides those already gathered.” (Is. 56:8)

In addition, the Hospitality Codes appear in the Hebrew Scriptures no less than thirty-six times. The instructions are clear:

“When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him.  
The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens;  
you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt:  
I the Lord am your God.” (Lev. 19:33-35)

There were definite rules of hospitality, and one of them was this:

If anyone, even an enemy, touches your tent rope  
s/he must be given hospitality and food inside your home for three days.  
Now, this person does not have to eat at your table –  
because that would make the person a part of your family;  
however, the person must be fed and cared for within your home for three days . . .  
and the specific time of “three days” is important  
because it is a Hebrew phrase that means change will happen . . .  
change in you and in the other person . . .

Now, this woman comes and asks Jesus for help.

Like so many people who came to Jesus from Tyre and Sidon for healing,  
she just wants help for her daughter.

But, strangely, Jesus denies her,  
and he does this in a harsh way that equates her with the dogs.  
He clearly indicates she’s not family, she’s not wanted

So the woman persists, and insists.  
She knows Jesus does not have to include her in his inner circle,  
but she also knows that he is obligated  
to extend his hospitality and care to her

So she persists, and insists,  
especially when Jesus shifts to the language of food and eating.

Finally, Jesus changes his mind.

That seems strange . . . or is it really so strange?

God changes God’s mind all the time in Hebrew scriptures (aka the “old Testament”)

Sometimes the Hebrew is translated as God “repents” (KJV) . . .  
sometimes it’s translated as God “changes God’s mind” (NRSV) –  
The point is: God is not static; God changes.

And God changes God’s mind in response to human beings.

In Jewish tradition,

as much as the people are trying to learn how to be in relationship with God,  
God is learning how to be in relationship with people –  
Like any real relationship, it’s a two-way process.

So there are times when the people change, and times when God changes.

(I’ve been marking these places with Post-Its in my Bible for years!)

Almost always God changes God's mind after someone speaks up and is persistent.  
For example:

Remember how Abram bargains with God to save Sodom,  
and God is willing to change God's mind and save the town? (Gn 18)

Remember how out in the wilderness, Moses says to God:  
repent and do not bring disaster on your people,

Then God repented (Ex 32:12, 14).

<sup>12</sup>Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; repent [change your mind] and do not bring disaster on your people. <sup>13</sup>Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'<sup>14</sup> And God repented [changed his mind] about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

And . . .

David says to God: Repent, have compassion on your servants. (Ps 90:13)  
God remembers his covenant with the people and repents (Ps 106:45)

God sends an angel to destroy Jerusalem,  
but then, in response to David, God repents.  
(I Chron 21:15; 2 Sam 24:16)

Joel and Jonah say to God: Repent of the evil,  
and God repents of the evil. (Joel 2:13; Jonah 3:10)

And Amos petitions God repeatedly, and then tells us over and over,  
"God repented for this: This also shall not be, says God." (e.g., Amos 7: 1-8)

So there is a history of people being persistent, and petitioning God,  
and then God changing God's mind in response.

In fact, Jesus has already instructed the people following him to ask for what they need:

"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? <sup>1</sup>Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Mt 7:7-11)

And, according to Luke,

In order to encourage people to speak up and be persistent,

Jesus uses examples of:

A neighbor who needs bread for guests in the middle of the night

A woman who seeks justice from a judge

So, in this situation, Jesus does what God does  
when God is petitioned by persistent people –  
Jesus changes his mind!!  
What a great example for us.

When people speak up  
God can change . . .  
Like Jesus changed . . .  
We can change . . .  
Situations change . . .

In 1998, a group of people from our local Methodist church met Daniel Apeppo.  
At that meeting, he told them about something the women of his town in Kenya needed.  
And because this was something the women needed,  
the whole community needed it, too.

What the women were asking for was water.  
They were walking five miles a day in search of water,  
they were looking for any water -- even unclean water –  
and carrying it home on their heads.  
Mortality and morbidity rates from typhoid, dysentery  
and other waterborne diseases were high.  
The children were often sick.  
Worse, children were dying.

Now they could have said that that was just the way it was,  
that's just the way God wanted them to live,  
but they watched their children dying  
and they prayed for something different.  
They didn't know how it would come,  
but they prayed.

The women of Ramoya, Kenya asked a group of strangers  
or something that seemed impossible –  
they asked for clean water.  
and the Methodists in Half Moon Bay --  
a town of 12,000 people on the rural California coast --  
heard their request.  
Then the two groups began to ask about and explore what options there might be.

They made a plan together.  
The Kenya Water Project would serve the 50,000 people who lived in and near  
the rocky and hilly farming community of Ramoya.  
They would build wells and pumping stations and tanks and pipes  
that would bring water to 8 kiosks in the area,  
and serve schools and medical clinics.  
The people in the US would provide the money;  
The people of Ramoya would provide the plans and the physical labor.

The Kenyan committees would head up this project,  
and these committees would be run by the women.  
This decision was made because the women carry the water  
and they knew the value of what they were working for.

Now this was a bit more complicated than it sounds,  
because among the Gusii people who live in Ramoya,  
decision-making was the men's responsibility –  
women were not even supposed to talk when men were present.  
And there were going to be plenty of men involved  
because each clan in the town had to provide  
up to 400 people twice a week  
to carry rocks, mix cement, lay bricks,  
and dig seven miles of trenches over a mountain.  
This was going to take a lot of change.

When Carren Nyamoita Magara was named as the chair of this project,  
the men were certain this project would fail --  
after all, it was being run by a woman.  
This was going to take a lot of change.

But then the men were surprised,  
because the women led the project successfully.  
And the men and the women worked together well.  
In May, 2004, the project was completed.  
And a lot of things had changed.

According to Daniel Apeppo, the men have changed their minds about women.  
Not only have they seen the women successfully lead this huge project,  
they are seeing the women now have time for small businesses,  
and dairy herds, and vegetable gardens  
and these have improved their families' nutrition and well-being.  
They are also seeing their daughters become leaders in their schools.

Daniel says the women of Ramoya see themselves differently, too.  
The women are taking up more challenges --  
they are getting more involved in decision making in their community.  
They say, "We want to be involved in decision making,  
economically, politically, and socially."  
And, they have become role models to women in other communities.

All of this, in turn, is changing their society.  
Daniel told us that the women's involvement in this one great project  
"is already changing traditional attitudes about the role and ability of women."

And there's more.

This change that was initiated by the requests of a few women  
who dared to ask for the impossible  
is rippling so far  
that even the Kenyans' perceptions about Americans  
were changed as well.

As Daniel said,

“Most people back home [in Kenya]  
think Americans don't have time for others.  
But we are seeing the opposite.  
Our experience gives confirmation that people in the US have the heart for them.  
It really comes from God touching people's hearts.  
It tells you what Christianity is all about.”

And the Americans do have time and heart . . .

The people in Half Moon Bay are now working on schools with the people of Ramoya.

You see, it really is true:

The Syro-Phoenician woman  
and the women of Ramoya, Kenya will tell you:  
being persistent,  
and asking God for what you need,  
even if it seems impossible,  
even if you have to ask strangers,  
changes things!

Sources:

<http://www.biblearchaeology.org>

*New Interpreter's Bible*

“Ramoya Water Project” by Daniel Apeppo

*The Bible: A Biography* by Karen Armstrong

*The Restored New Testament: A New Translation with Commentary, Including the Gnostic Gospels*

*Thomas, Mary, and Judas* translated by Willis Barnstone

*A New Kind of Christianity* by Bruce McLaren

*The Frugal Gourmet Keeps the Feast* by Jeff Smith

TEXTS:

Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and 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 masters' 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.

## 1 Kings 17:17-24

<sup>8</sup>Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, <sup>9</sup>“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” <sup>10</sup>So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” <sup>11</sup>As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” <sup>12</sup>But she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” <sup>13</sup>Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. <sup>14</sup>For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.” <sup>15</sup>She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. <sup>16</sup>The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

<sup>17</sup>After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. <sup>18</sup>She then said to Elijah, “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!” <sup>19</sup>But he said to her, “Give me your son.” He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. <sup>20</sup>He cried out to the Lord, “O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?” <sup>21</sup>Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the Lord, “O Lord my God, let this child’s life come into him again.” <sup>22</sup>The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. <sup>23</sup>Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, “See, your son is alive.” <sup>24</sup>So the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.”

## Also Luke 11:5-10

<sup>5</sup>And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; <sup>6</sup>for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ <sup>7</sup>And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ <sup>8</sup>I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. <sup>9</sup>“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. <sup>10</sup>For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

## Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. <sup>2</sup>He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. <sup>3</sup>In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ <sup>4</sup>For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, <sup>5</sup>yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” <sup>6</sup>And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. <sup>7</sup>And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? <sup>8</sup>I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”