

There is no retirement from being a Canaanite woman

At my ordination Bishop Walter Klaiber, who's always been a wonderful teacher and supportive friend, presented to me the following Bible verse:

"God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power and of love and of thoughtfulness."

2 Timothy 1: 7

He knew I would need it.

And it fitted perfectly with the Bible story that had for years already been my favourite: **The story of the Canaanite mother from Matthew 15: 21-28.**

Unusually for the New Testament stories, Matthew quotes the words of a woman. Often the women have no names, often their concern is only mentioned but they themselves don't speak.

Okay, she still has no name, that's right.

But in this story, we meet a woman who discusses bravely and full of self-confidence and knowledge with a foreign man. By doing this she overcomes at least two boundaries: women in those days did not talk to men in public. She did. Foreigners were not spoken to. She did.

This woman has a significant voice. She speaks out loud and becomes a role model for all of us who need to stand up and speak, because there is no one else who will.

Jesus states a clear job description that he has worked towards up until this point. The foreign woman and her daughter fell out of his charge. But the woman doesn't accept that and **makes him eventually stretch beyond his comfort zones and traditions, widen his horizon and become the Messiah of the world.**

The story has both: a theological discussion and a miracle of healing.

The discussion is dominated by the woman, who is both, a stranger to Israel and the God of Israel. **She initiates the movement in the story.** She knows best, and is proven right because of her remarkable persistence!

Jesus changes through her. And what she does he calls great faith! The woman is an outsider, a descendant of a former enemy, but she knows a surprising amount about the Jewish God and faith. Her theological language, with which she discussed with Jesus is that of an insider. How come?

Does she know the psalms, the language of which she uses?

What does she know about the Lord, about Jesus being the Son of David?

Should the Jews change their understanding of who is their neighbour and accept all as brothers and sisters?

Would that, in the end, strengthen them, since they were all suffering from Roman occupation?

It may help to allow relationship and sharing between oppressed people who all suffer in the same way.

Does the passage show us that solidarity among those who thought they had nothing to do with each other, can actually bring them further and save them?

There are witnesses to the new route the discussion between Jesus and the woman takes. Matthew locates the whole story in public by the roadside. **The woman is loud, the argument cannot be ignored by those standing or walking by.** Her concern about the well-being of her daughter leads her to break all the rules of conduct of her time and place.

By how she expresses herself, what she is saying and where she is saying it, she becomes a prophet for a new life that is possible among those who break down barriers and seek a common future in which all will benefit from the openness and flexibility that the world needs in order to survive.

The disciples wish no change, they want the woman to be sent away. They wish for peace and quiet, want to move on as they always had. Only Jesus gradually understands: **The story reaches a turning point after the woman's wise argument.**

"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Jesus openly states her great faith, and thus welcomes her into the community of the believers in the living God. He honours her, and her courage, and her unshakable confidence in him, - and her insight into the inclusive power, presence and mercy of God.

The woman's faith foreshadows the response of the gentiles to the gospel, as it is the case when Matthew writes down his version of the Jesus stories, **a faith that overcomes barriers and spreads throughout the whole then known world.**

People at all times may have wondered who to identify with in the story, where to place themselves. People at all times may have had similar experiences as those mentioned in the text. People at all time, men and women, may have been shocked and surprised by Jesus' harsh responses to this woman in need. People at all times may have learned from the story and sought a life that is more life-giving and liberating than what they'd known before.

Jesus was changed by this woman's boldness. She knows who Jesus is, and holds him to it; she will not let go before he is fully engaged with who he should be. And in a way Matthew asks those who listen then, and who read the story now, to also listen to this woman and be transformed through a faith like hers: persistent, courageous and confident in God's faithfulness to God's promises for the whole world.

We know who Jesus is. We know what God can do.

Do we sometimes give up too early, let forces and systems discourage us instead of insisting on what we know is possible, what we know is right, and what we know God has promised to all his people?

This story of a woman and her daughter is not only the story of a loving parent fighting for the health of a sick child. **It is the story of all who stand up and speak out for change, justice and freedom for all.**

I am the Canaanite woman...

You are...

I was the Canaanite woman when I applied for the ministry in the Methodist Church 40 years ago. Women were not wanted. But I knew, I had a call. I argued, insisted, begged... and got not only the crumbs but the whole loaf of delicious communion bread that lasted for 40 exciting years.

I was a Canaanite woman when I went to schools and talked to teachers on behalf of my own and other people's children. When I demanded reforms and changes in the system so the needs of the children and students could be better met.

This congregation was full of Canaanite women when we offered church asylum to Amjad Ghorri in 2014 and Isata Nabbie in 2016. When we had to oppose the Bavarian government with its harsh immigration laws and its hostility towards refugees and asylum seekers.

I was a Canaanite woman in so many situations of my private and my professional life. **The more I stretched beyond my comfort zones, the more I learned: "I can do it!"**

"I can make a difference."

"I will not give up!"

"I can find a solution..."

However, every coin has got two sides.

There were and are the times, when courage, persistence and energy fail. The times when nothing can be done, because the circumstances are the way they are.

In those times, meeting another Bible woman helped my carry on and walk my path. **It's the woman who anointed Jesus (Mark 14). And after her passionate and loving action, Jesus said of her: "She has done all she could..."**

Circumstances, politics, the system were the way they were. The rulers of the time had made their cruel plans, abused their power and favoured violence over peace.

All these the anointing woman could not stop. The only thing she could do, was to help and love the friend who the rulers a little later would kill.

So, I guess, what I learned over the years is that it is wise **to be able to differentiate between times when it is necessary and appropriate to argue and speak out, and times when only the small gesture, the loving presence and the tenderness will do.**

To be and do both at the right times, is an ongoing lesson to learn...

There is no retirement from being a Canaanite woman.

Or an anointing woman.

You are in it forever and beyond.

Amen.