

The Kingdom Movement *The Gospel of Matthew*

Jesus Takes Us Far from Home *Matthew 15:21 – 28*

Introduction: The Handshake That Almost Didn't Happen

I want to tell you about a handshake that almost didn't happen. During World War II, on February 28, 1944, Corrie Ten Boom and her sister Betsie were arrested for housing Jews in their home in Holland. They were taken eventually to Ravensbrück, a prison camp in Germany where they were treated horribly. Corrie watched labor camp guards strike Betsie for being too weak to shovel. Betsie later died. Corrie was discharged in 1945, and she began to share all over Holland, Europe, and the United States what God had done in those dark days. Then, she went to Germany, and this is what she writes in *The Hiding Place*:

'It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbrück. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there--the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie's pain-blanching face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. 'How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein,' he said. 'To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!'

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity...'

Relevance:

Jesus leads *us*, also, to reach out to the stranger, embrace the foreigner, and even shake hands with the enemy. That is one reason why following Jesus is not for the faint of heart. You will need strength that ultimately only he provides. But he can and does pour it into our hearts and out through our lives. But neither does it happen instantaneously. If you read Corrie Ten Boom's book *The Hiding Place*, you can only be struck by the countless times that Corrie was in a situation in which she looked to Jesus. Over and over, she chose Jesus. In turn, he shaped her heart. The same can be said of the earliest disciples. They spent time with him, over and over. In turn, Jesus shaped their hearts. We look back on that process to follow Jesus through their footsteps. The guiding question for us is, 'What is your next step?'

Context:

We are in the Gospel of Matthew, which is a book of Christian discipleship. It is about Jesus creating God's new humanity for all God's humanity, and sending his followers out in that mission. In this section, Matthew 14 – 18, the fourth main section of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is leading his followers back and forth across the region of the Sea of Galilee. He is training them explicitly in what we might call his multi-ethnic and multi-cultural mission. In the last section, Matthew 15:1 – 20, Jesus has brought up the reality that there is a connection between the heart and the mouth, and the sin of our hearts is shown by the words we say through our mouths. He challenges the Pharisees, a group of Jewish opinion leaders about the words that come out of their mouths. Now he is going to challenge his own disciples, in a different way.

The Disciples' Foot in Mouth Disease: v.21 – 23

²¹ Jesus went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and began to cry out, saying, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.' ²³ But he did not answer her a word. [Why? I'll talk about that.] And his disciples came and implored him, saying, 'Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.'

The disciples' response to this woman is unusual, because their usual response to people is, 'Can't you do something, Jesus, to help this person?' (Mt.8:16) They had even seen Jesus heal the servant of a Roman centurion,

Roman being in the enemy camp, so healing the daughter of this Canaanite woman is something they should get. Even during the feeding of the five thousand, the disciples seemed to care about the crowd and said to Jesus, 'This place is desolate and the hour is late; so send the crowds away so they can get something to eat' (Mt.14:15). But here, the disciples say, 'Send her away,' and not because they want her to be able to buy food before the shops close. Why do they say this? Their own statement to follow it up is, 'Because she keeps shouting at us.' In other words, she's loud, she's rude, and she doesn't treat us with the respect we think we deserve. But there's more. In v.22, Matthew identifies this woman with her ethnicity. She is a Canaanite. That's really telling. Canaanites were ancestral enemies of Israel, from the time of Moses, about fourteen hundred years before Jesus. Israel was a faith, not an ethnicity, so they were actually open to Canaanites joining them. There were Canaanites like Caleb who abandoned Canaanite culture and religion, and joined Israel and worshiped God; but most seemed to not do that.¹ They remained enemies of Israel. Over the centuries, the two sides fought skirmishes. In this region, the Canaanite civilization of Tyre and Sidon used to be big human traffickers (Ezk.27:13; 34:27); they used to kidnap Jewish people into slavery. And the Jewish historian Josephus wrote, 'Of the Phoenicians, the Tyrians have the most ill-feeling towards us.'² So the disciples seem to be returning the hatred. As far as Jesus is concerned, they are putting their foot in their mouths.

Illus: All of us step into prejudices that we inherit. We learn them, sometimes in the most intimate of moments, from our parents and close friends. We learn them just from the air we breathe. When I was about 8 years old and went to my cousin's wedding, my parents took the opportunity to tell me about the racial hierarchy in her mind. She said she'd be happiest with a Japanese girl, then a girl who is Asian but not Japanese, then a girl who is white. But she didn't want me to marry a black or Latino girl. Things like that shape your view of people. There were all kinds of other factors. And the impact was this: When I came to Jesus and gave my life to him, the first people I thought about sharing my faith with were my parents and friends at school, who were mostly Asian and some white. Fine: We all have to start somewhere. I had Latino and Middle Eastern friends on my swim team and neighborhood but I didn't really think about them. And I didn't have any black friends. It wasn't until late in college that I seriously thought about sharing my faith with a black person. From Jesus' perspective, my growth in this was slow and my apathy was a problem. I had to come face to face with that.

No wonder Jesus has to take his disciples far from home in order to let them see the ugliness in themselves. Geography is important in the Gospel of Matthew. In this section, especially, Jesus takes his disciples to certain locations. He's gone between Jewish and Gentile areas. Tyre and Sidon is the farthest place. It's far from home, away from the Temple, from the center of Judaism, which was the main concern in our last passage, Matthew 15:1 – 20. Jesus goes even farther north than the Galilean neighborhoods in which the disciples grew up. But that's what Jesus has to do in order to let this sin come out of their mouths. When they finally get a chance to serve a Canaanite person, far from home, they say, 'Send her away.' Jesus was silent so his disciples would have to speak up and say something. And when they open their mouths, they stick their foot right in.

Illus: I can relate to that. During my junior year in high school, my best friend invited me to go to a spring break trip to the U.S.-Mexico border. We went to a town called Mexicali, Mexico. It was very intense poverty. I had never seen poverty like that before. And I had never been around Mexican people before. I realized there and then that I had these stereotypes of them and prejudices against them. So even though we were only there for 1 week, I was uncomfortable and wanted to go home. What I felt was, 'I'm a competitive swimmer, taking a week off during the competitive season.' I also felt this sense that those people in Mexicali didn't really understand me, and what hopes I had for my future. But underneath all that, as a non-committed agnostic-atheist at the time, I didn't have a good strong reason for believing that these Mexican children we were playing soccer with were worth my time and sacrifice. What I had to deal with was the question of worth. What made those impoverished children worth it, valuable, not just in an abstract sense, but worth enough for me to spend my time like this, and perhaps, as I saw others doing, spending my life like this. Because I had no answers for that, and Jesus did have an answer, I gave my life to Jesus.

¹ Israel opposed their child sacrifice and other sins (Gen.4:16 – 25; 22; Lev.18:21; 1 Ki.16:34; 2 Ki.3:27; Mic.6:7). Israel, however, welcomed the conversion of Canaanites: Judah married Shua (Gen.38:2), learned to accept Tamar (Gen.38); Shaul (Ex.6:15); a 'mixed multitude' (Ex.12:38); Caleb (Num.32:12); Rahab (Josh.6:17 – 25). The conquest of Canaan is a full discussion in itself. See my presentation(s) on that for more info, located on this page: http://nagasawafamily.org/archives_question_goodness_of_god.htm

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p.121

Illus: Another acquaintance of mine, a woman named Nayri, who used to be the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship campus staff at Boston University, felt Jesus lead her to Turkey on a trip to share about her faith. That was hard for her, not only because she was a single woman in a Muslim culture, but because she's ethnically Armenian, and Turkey massacred the Armenians in what is called the first genocide of the 20th century, in the 1915. Nayri's grandparents disappeared from Turkey in that time. But Turkey as a whole denies that it was genocide, and sometimes denies the events altogether. That was really hard for Nayri, because people wouldn't even acknowledge what happened to her family. So Jesus led her to a place where she had to face ugliness inside her.

Here's the issue: Jesus does not protect us *from the knowledge of ourselves*. In fact, he calls us to face it. The disciples afterwards must have been embarrassed and sad about what had come out of their mouths. Maybe they each thought, 'Was that really me?' And that's a good question: Who are you really? Most of the time, especially in the U.S., we use our money to protect us from facing ourselves. We pay for privacy. We pay for space. We pay for comfort. And so we deceive ourselves into thinking that we are just *nice*. No: we protect ourselves from inconvenient truths about ourselves. When are you more yourself? When you are surrounded by your comfort zone? People you know and like? Streets that you feel safe on? Or when you are outside it, insecure, defensive, and wanting to preemptively strike people before they strike you?

Here's another exercise: Think about how long you spent practicing your signature, with your strong hand. You've made it look practiced, refined, and personalized. Now imagine trying to sign your name with your weak hand. How will it come out? Messy. Unpracticed. Sloppy. Which signature is more 'you'? The one from your stronger hand? Or the one from your weaker hand? That's the question Jesus is raising for his disciples: What comes out of you? Mind you, this is not even a group of big Canaanite men walking down the street. This is one Canaanite woman who is kind of loud.

Jesus Plays on Words, Speaks God's Heart

Then, Jesus says two things that seem really harsh. First, in v.24: ²⁴ But he answered and said, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' That seems like he's drawing an ethnic or racial line of some sort. In a minute, I'll explain what Jesus meant and why the woman kept coming towards Jesus in v.25: ²⁵ But she came and began to bow down before him, saying, 'Lord, help me!' Then, second, Jesus seems to insult her, in v.26: ²⁶ And he answered and said, 'It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.'

Whoa. This seems really harsh for Jesus to say. The term 'dog' was a slur back then. Jews thought Gentiles were unclean and uncivilized, because they didn't follow the Jewish Law. So they called them 'dogs' because big dangerous dogs roamed the street scavenging around. In the rural areas of the Dominican Republic, we were told to stay away from the dogs on the street because they could have rabies; they could bite; they were not pets. So we have to wrestle with this. Is Jesus using a bad word, a slur? Is he putting down this woman using a standard swear?

Here we have to look behind the English translation and read the Greek. Typically, Jews used the Greek term *kusin* (e.g. Mt.7:6), for the street dogs.³ And that's the term that Jews used for Gentiles: 'those unclean, uncivilized animals.' But Jesus did not use that term. He used the diminutive term *kunariois* (15:26), which were not the larger street dogs, but smaller household pets (ibid, p.122). Now one commentator I read, R.T. France, says that if Jesus spoke Aramaic, there is no distinction like that in Aramaic.⁴ However, it is extremely likely that this conversation was in Greek, as Jesus and the disciples, having grown up in the Galilee area, probably spoke Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek; and the woman, living in a Greek territory, spoke Greek as well. Thus, my judgment is that this conversation happened in Greek, and that the distinction between the terms is *key* to the passage.

Look at her response. Does she get it? Yes, in v.27: ²⁷ But she said, 'Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.' This woman has perked up, because Jesus has just painted a different picture by using another word. He didn't use the word for exclusion, mangy street dog, *kusin*. He used the word for inclusion, the pet who belonged with the family in the house, *kunariois*. So how does she reply? With guts and wits. She picks up on this and says, 'I'm part of the family!' She develops Jesus' parable. When pet dogs are part of the master's family, the master does feed the pet dog, and *not* just with crumbs. That's an understatement. She is

³ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p.122

⁴ R.T. France, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Matthew*, p.250

saying that pet dogs feed on falling crumbs when the master isn't even being intentional at the time. She is being witty and gutsy, saying that even if Jesus wasn't intentionally here to see *her*, hey, even *unintentionally* he could just let the crumbs of his healing power fall from the table. Jesus could do it without even trying. That's what she believes about Jesus.

Illus: Before I learned how to drive, my swim coach taught me how to drive his red 1960's Volvo, stick shift, in parking lots. He was a very generous man who taught many of his swim students how to drive. So when I was old enough, at around 14, he let me try it. Some of the older kids said, 'Uh oh, coach, you're going to give *Mako* a turn?' I knew they were joking, but being insecure, I didn't know what to say. Our coach said, 'You're right.' Then he put his hand on my shoulder with a smile and said, 'What was I thinking?' That interaction is kind of like the one Jesus has with the Canaanite woman. He expresses inclusion.

Now let me take a step back and deal with the doubts you may have. Isn't Jesus still calling her a dog? Even if it's a pet dog? Well, yes. But let's stop and think about slang words that we use. Now you may know the N-word, the MF-word, and the B-word. Sometimes, those are insults. But sometimes, those are words that *friends* call each other. 'I'm your B.' 'You're my MF.' 'He's my N.' And that happens in many languages, in many ways, with many other words. I'm not saying here whether that's wrong or right, or wise or not. I'm just saying that *who* is saying *what*, and *when* and *where* and *to whom* can change the meaning of those words from insult to affection, from distance to intimacy. So if you're uneasy with the pet dog language, just remember: We let ourselves do that; why can't we allow Jesus to do it?

Now only that, I think there are a lot of body language and facial expressions that we have to assume here. Was Jesus turned away from the woman, with arms crossed, communicating non-verbally what the disciples were saying verbally? 'Don't bother me'? Or, was Jesus facing the woman, hands and arms open, smiling at her, to make sure that she would get his real meaning? I think we can infer that, based on her quick response, and also based on what Jesus says in parables about running after lost sheep, lost sons, and so on (Lk.15:1 – 32). Jesus doesn't make it unnecessarily hard for people to come to him. He opens the door to this woman. What came out of the disciples' mouth is unfriendly, cold, sinful, and unclean. What comes out of his mouth is God's sense of humor perhaps, but certainly His pure acceptance, God's welcome invitation, God's warm affection. From there, comes Jesus' transformation.

But you might question me by asking, 'Why does Jesus say in the first place that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel?' Because Jesus was actually clarifying the definition of 'Israel.' You see, the debate between Jesus and many of the Pharisees was whether Israel was a faith community, or an ethnic community. Jesus believed it was a faith community, and he was renewing Israel around himself. He was reliving Israel's story, becoming the one true Israel. So those who believed in him – they became the true Israel by extension and by connection to Jesus. At least some of the Pharisees, on the other hand, believed that Israel was an ethnic community. It was based on biological descent from Abraham and Sarah, and then Isaac and Rebekah, and then Jacob and Rachel and Leah. What is God's definition of Israel? Jesus answered that by going back into the Old Testament texts and noticing that other people could convert into Israel and join it. So, he was simply repeating that. He butted heads with those who wanted to define Israel as an ethnicity, or a race, or a bloodline. There was no biblical basis for it. As I said before, even Canaanites joined Israel in the days of Moses and Joshua, and even before. Judah, who became the firstborn of Israel, married Shua, a Canaanite woman (Gen.38:2), and learned to accept Tamar, another Canaanite woman, into his family (Gen.38); Shaul was a Canaanite who had joined Israel by the time of Egypt (Ex.6:15); a 'mixed multitude' left Egypt with Israel, and presumably some Canaanitees were with them (Ex.12:38); Caleb was one of Moses' top two lieutenants, and he was a Kenizzite, a Canaanite (Num.32:12); then Rahab and her whole household converted when Israel called Jericho to surrender (Josh.6:17 – 25). And it's actually reasonable to think that the Canaanite woman here knew those stories. That's what brought her here now, to Jesus. So yes, Jesus said, 'I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But the question is, 'What is Israel?' Israel is a faith community that the woman could become part of. And now she finds Jesus inviting her in.

Illus: My acquaintance Nayri eventually wound up going to Turkey for many years, and teaching English there. That's how she felt Jesus' leading, despite the challenges. This is how she included her students in her life and faith. She said, 'Let's work on conjugating noun-verb agreement. Repeat after me: I sin; you sin; we all sin!' And she would explain what that meant to her. She included them in her faith language.

Illus: You all know something about the intense and seemingly unresolvable conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. I'm on the email list of a Christian ministry called Musalaha, which does reconciliation work especially among Israeli Messianic believers (in other words, Jewish Christians) and Palestinian Christians. One of their programs is called Bridge Builders. You'll get a sense for what they do in this program by this testimony: 'I am a Palestinian of Armenian descent and living in Jerusalem. I grew up under the occupation, passing through checkpoints daily. The looks I received in West Jerusalem when I spoke any language other than Hebrew made me want to keep my contact with the "other side" limited, but I was always curious. I actually wanted to meet "them" – the Israelis. When I first heard about Bridge Builders, I thought it was the perfect opportunity for me to have a better understanding about the other side. Yakov* was one of the Israeli participants I met on the encounter, and the first person I had a conversation with about the conflict. This talk made me take a step back and wonder whether or not it was a good decision to come in the first place! At the airport I met the other Israelis with a friendly hello, and waiting through the two-hour check-in gave us the chance to talk. I let my guard down a little, but as I walked past security, a nervous feeling came over me. I had no idea what to expect from this ten day trip, so I let God lead the way. When we arrived in Norway we were met by a group of ten Norwegians who rounded out the group of Israelis and Palestinians. Our first few days were spent camping in the mountains, hiking in the rain, and experiencing the extraordinary beauty of Forensetet... Our private talks directly related to the conflict and our experiences, including settlements, checkpoints, Palestine and Israel. The talks were challenging, unsettling, and sometimes frustrating. Norwegians sat among us, wanting to know more, calmly listening and discussing with us... We let the emotional wall between us crumble; hoping that one day the Separation Wall will come down as well. Planning for these evenings and sharing this part of ourselves with our new friends brought us closer together. Together we stepped into a fairytale of God's creation and we took a piece of it back with us to reality.' (Musalaha email, 9/21/12) This work of Musalaha will one day be seen to be important in this conflict because they are bringing people to Jesus. The story of the Canaanite woman has got to be one of the earliest lessons from Jesus.

There is value to following Jesus into situations with other people where the messy junk in our hearts comes out of our mouths, or just our lives, so Jesus can heal it. And if we're open to him, this might happen anywhere.

Illus: When I went to college, I had to learn to care about drunk people. That was hard for me because my dad was an alcoholic and I didn't like being around drunk people. They just reminded me too much of my dad. But I was placed as a freshman in an all freshman dorm. There were a lot of parties there. And a lot of parties meant a lot of drunk people. So there was one night when I came back late from hanging out with my own friends. I crossed the big common room and saw that there were a few of my dormmates, who I knew to be Christians, helping to clean up and help people get up. They were sober. They were laughing. But they were also caring. I knew in that moment that Jesus was asking me if I could follow him like that.

How is Jesus leading you? Who is the person you haven't considered? They might be half way around the world. They could be half way down the hall at work. It might be someone in your life right now that you haven't considered sharing your faith with. Jesus is saying, 'Let's go a bit further from home base' to you. Why? To advance his mission, true. But also to pour his life into that part of you that is unpracticed, sloppy, messy, perhaps prejudiced, judgmental, angry, or fearful.

Jesus will make it feel familiar. The woman's word of thanks has got to ring a bell for the disciples, too. She says that she can benefit from Jesus' healing power like a pet dog would get crumbs, presumably breadcrumbs, from his master's table. Talk of crumbs and bread should be really familiar to the disciples by now. They were the ones to pass Jesus' bread around to five thousand men, not counting women and children. It was a temple image – Jesus is the new presence of God, the place, and now the person, in whom God dwells. Now they are getting that the presence of God can go far away from home.

Right after this, we will see Jesus feed the four thousand with seven loaves of bread, leaving seven large baskets leftover. Who they are and what the number seven means, we'll leave for then. Jesus nourishes (in a sense) this woman, too, by sharing his healing power with her daughter. There is this running metaphor throughout Matthew 14 – 16 of bread. Jesus includes others by means of sharing a meal, literally or figuratively. He meets her need. He heals her daughter, like he healed the servant of the Roman centurion. And in the process, he teaches his disciples that he loves their ancestral enemies, and offers them his healing and transforming power, too.

For this meeting was no accident. Remember how Jesus began his ministry – guided by the word of the Father and the power of the Spirit. Jesus knew exactly where to go to find this spiritually searching woman, guided by the Spirit and listening to the Father. He has not been setting up obstacles for her. The real lesson was for the disciples. Jesus has been trying to get his disciples to know his vision, feel his heart, and say the right thing.

Jesus Speaks God's Blessing: v.28

Jesus certainly says the right thing, in v.28: ²⁸ 'Then Jesus said to her, 'O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed at once.' I like translating the phrase 'as you wish' instead as 'as you desire.' Faith is fueled by desire, not just intellect. This woman's faith is great because her desire is great. She is the woman who pushed through the men. She is the Canaanite who pushed through a circle of Jews. She is the Canaanite who allowed Jesus to take away her prejudice against the Jews, so that she could come to Jesus and claim not the power of the king of Tyre, but the love of the Son of David.

I want to resume with Corrie Ten Boom's story of meeting the former Nazi officer. Remember where we left off, in the church, where the former Nazi officer came up to Corrie Ten Boom after she spoke, and held out his hand in friendship. Corrie continues:

'And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.'

We will need Jesus' help. Thank God he offers it to us.