

“A CANAANITE WOMAN”

Matthew 15:21-28

There it is—right there in the bulletin:

“Reverend Doctor” Steve Holdzkom.

I’ve never been very big about titles.

During my 44 years of active ministry,

I hardly ever was called “Reverend Holdzkom.”

That was my Dad.

I was usually *Pastor* Holdzkom, or better Pastor Steve.

And the “Doctor” part—

that hardly seems real—

although I *did* get my Doctor of Ministry degree

from Anderson University ten years ago—

and they gave me this nifty academic hood,

and a big diploma

that hangs on the wall of my study—

but getting that degree—after being out of school for decades—

was a near thing:

almost didn’t get it

I started my class work at Anderson University School of Theology in 2007,

and finished that in two and a half years—

and then I was to start work on my dissertation—

75,000 words,

150 sources—

a major professional project.

I moved to a new church in Lapel in 2009,

and my mother died about a year later,

and my dad went into assisted living,

and Debbie, my wife, and I started

going through all my parents’ stuff

getting ready to sell their house.

That was a huge job—and very emotional

for me—

and with all this added stress in my life,

I just lost any interest or passion

in writing a big project

and getting a degree—

so, in January of 2011,

I notified the Doctor of Ministry Studies Committee

and my Professional Project Committee

that I was withdrawing from the program.
 Immediately, I got a flood of e-mails back from them,
 trying to talk me out of withdrawing,
 but I felt my mind was made up.
 Then, the Sunday after I had started the withdrawal process,
 I was at the church getting ready for worship,
 and the tech people, who ran the sound system
 and the projections, came in—
 the first ones to arrive at the building after me,
 as was usual,
 and Andy came up to me and gave me a hug,
 as usual—
 and he said, “How’s your doctoral work going?”
 Now, I’m glad he had his arms around me
 when he said that,
 because I was so surprised and so shocked
 by his words,
 that you could’ve knocked me over
 with a feather.

No one from the church—
 NO ONE—
 had said anything about my doctoral work
for months!
 And here, the Sunday after I started to withdraw,
 out of the blue,
 Andy’s asking!

I don’t know if I answered him.
 I may have mumbled an “Okay,”
 but that was the end of it—I thought.
 That same Sunday,
 after worship and Sunday School,
 Debbie and I went out to lunch with church friends—
 and in the middle of lunch, one of them asks,
 “So—how’s your doctoral work going?”
 I shook my head and laughed,
 and said that just a couple of days before,
 I’d started the withdrawal process,
 and told them why.

But it set me to thinking—
 Could it just be *coincidence* that on the Sunday after I withdrew

from the program,
 not one, but *two*, people from the church asked me about it—
 when no one—including myself—
 had said anything about it for months?
 I thought about reconsidering my decision—
 but I still couldn't think of anything I wanted to write
 my dissertation on.

The next day—Monday—was Martin Luther King Day,
 and Debbie had the day off school,
 so we decided to come here to Muncie
 to work on my parent's house,
 and on the way we were talking about all this.
 I told her what I really wanted to write
 was a devotional commentary on the Gospel of John,
 but that didn't fit the criteria
 for a Doctor of Ministry project—
 In case you don't know, a Doctor of Ministry degree
 is supposed to be “practical”—
 that is, it's supposed to be about the ministry
 you are doing in the local church
 you are serving,
 so writing something “devotional” didn't fit
 the criteria.

It was right there in the informational handbook
 I got when I started the program:
 “In no way is [the project] to be a sermonic or devotional piece.”

So, driving down the road, on the way to Muncie,
 talking about all these things—
 kinda sounds like a “road to Emmaus” experience, doesn't it—
 suddenly—

I could almost show you the spot on the road
 where it happened—

I had a brainstorm,
 and could see how I could make this project work.
 I started telling Debbie about it—
 and the more we talked,
 the more the pieces fell into place—
 and I even had a title—
 in all my work before,

even when I thought I had a project
I could do,

I didn't have a title—

but the title came:

“Living Water:

The Immersion of a Church

(that was Lapel Ford Street)

in the Gospel of John

for Spiritual Growth and Discipleship”.

Not only would it include daily devotionals I would write
but also I'd preach every Sunday through John,
and lead a Bible study on John,
and do a questionnaire before and after the project
to try to measure the congregation's
spiritual growth.

And that got me back on track,

reading and studying

in the Gospel of John

in preparation

for making a seven-month journey

with my congregation

beginning in Advent

continuing through Pentecost

through the Gospel of John.

And the more I read and studied,

the more I wanted to read and study,

the more excited and passionate I got.

And this is the end product.

(Show dissertation)

And all because two church friends said,

“So—how's your doctoral work going?”

And here's the point—

words can change your life.

What we say to others can and does make a difference.

An even more important example comes in our Gospel lesson this morning.

A bit of context:

earlier in Matthew's Gospel,

Jesus met and healed two demon-possessed men

on the Gentile side of the lake,
 and sent their legion of demons into the pigs.
 As a result, Jesus was asked to leave the region,
 and go back to the Jewish side of the lake
 where he belonged.

Except for the healed men,
 it seemed that Jesus' first attempt at a Gentile mission
 was a failure.
 Maybe he took this as a sign
 that his ministry was to be aimed at "*the lost sheep of Israel*"—
 that he was sent to the Jews
 and only to the Jews.

Of course, we can't know for sure
 what was in Jesus' mind,
 but at least, it seems so.
 So he continued his ministry among the Jews,
 feeding the 5,000,
 preaching the presence of the Kingdom,
 being harassed and criticized by the Pharisees.

Then, he decides
 he needs to get some rest someplace away from the crowds,
 someplace where he's unknown—
 so he travels northwest,
 to the Mediterranean coastal town of Tyre.
 But it seems that even here, someone has heard of him—
 because he is pursued,
 "dogged" we might say,
 by this Gentile, Canaanite woman,
 whose daughter is ill,
 demon-possessed,
 and who wants Jesus
 to heal her.

Jesus tries to ignore her,
 the disciples try to send her away,
 and Jesus tells them why he's not inclined to help her—
 "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.*"
 He sees his mission now to the Jews
 and the Jews alone.
 But the woman is nothing if not persistent—
 after all, it's not for herself,

but for her daughter,
 and even Gentiles,
 even Canaanites,
 love their kids—
 and eventually she corners Jesus and asks him for help.
 His response seems kinda cold—
 rude, even.
 He says, *“It’s not right to take the children’s bread
 and throw it to the dogs.”*
 In essence, I’m here for the Jews and not the Gentiles.
 The Jews should receive the blessings of my ministry,
 not the Gentiles.
 For me to help you would be like
 taking the children’s bread
 and throwing it to the dogs.
 Like I said, kinda rude.
 He all but calls this lady a dog.
 Not very nice.
 But she is not to be put off—
 even by rudeness—
 in fact, she thinks fast and has a snappy comeback.
*“True, sir,” she says, but even the dogs get to lick up the crumbs
 that fall from the table.”*
 And her response—
 her words—
 pull Jesus up short.
 I can almost imagine Jesus doing a double-take.
 “Wh-what?”
 I wonder if there was a pause here—
 Jesus—looking at his disciples,
 looking into the eager, expectant face of this mother—
 this Gentile, Canaanite woman,
 whom the Jews were told to hate and destroy—
 maybe thinking, “Well, Father, now what?”
 Then he commends her faith—and heals her daughter from a distance.
 Now Matthew isn’t as clear at this point as Mark is,
 upon which this story is based,
 but Mark says that Jesus continues his northern journey,
 on up the coast to Sidon,

and then back south into the region of the Decapolis—
 back into Gentile territory—
 and then we get the story of the feeding of the 4,000
 on the Gentile side of the lake.

The only thing I can think is that this Canaanite woman,
 with her snappy comeback,
 caused Jesus to reconsider his Gentile mission,
 kinda like my church friends with their questions
 caused me to reconsider my doctoral program.

I imagine that on this long journey
 through the north country
 that Jesus is thinking about
 what the woman said,
 and praying about
 what his mission really is.

Maybe he begins to think about the Servant Song in Isaiah
 that says, “*The Lord says...*”

*It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
 to restore the tribes of Jacob
 and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles
 that you may bring my salvation
 to the ends of the earth.”*

[Isaiah 49:6]

Maybe this woman’s words
 cause Jesus to rethink his mission,
 and go back to the Gentile side of the lake—
 where he finds this crowd of 4,000 Gentiles,
 that he teaches for three days,
 and miraculously feeds
 with seven loaves
 and a few fish.

Maybe this woman’s words
 changed the direction of *Jesus*’ life.

Wow!

Now that’s something to think about.

It’s amazing to think that our words can make a difference in someone’s life.

What we say—and how we say it—can change a person’s direction.

My two church friends didn’t know it—

but their words changed the direction of my life.

With their words coming out of the blue,
 and the brainstorm I had the next day,
 I have come to believe that the Holy Spirit was involved
 in ways I can't yet fathom.
 The Canaanite woman was just trying to get help for her daughter—
 but her words may well have changed the direction
 of Jesus' mission and ministry.
 Maybe—just maybe—the Holy Spirit was involved there too.

Words—

“I love you.”
 “I'm here for you.”
 “You can do it.”
 “How can I help you?”
 “I forgive you.”
 “You are important.”
 “How is it with your soul?”
 “Come and see.”—

Words—

your words—
 can have the power of the Holy Spirit in them
 to change and transform another person's life—
 even without your knowing it.

All this should pull *us* up short, I think.

All this should make us stop and think.

All this should make us watch what we say—and how we say it—
 because our words have the power to change someone's life—
 for good—or ill.

Our words can transform another person's life—
 or they can send another person on a downward path.

There are many places in the Scriptures that tell us this.

Today we see the example of this Canaanite woman
 to do this—even for Jesus.

Watch your words!

The Holy Spirit may be ready to use you—
 for the good of someone else—
 maybe even, for the good
 of the world!

Think about *that*!