

SERMON – Syrophenician Woman

Rev. Donna Knutson

MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH AND THE MEDITATIONS OF MY HEART, BE PLEASING TO YOU OH LORD, MY BELOVED AND MY REDEEMER...Amen

“She is the woman who waits; she is the woman who tries; she is the woman of victory; she is the woman of thought, the woman who creates; she is the woman who cures; she is the Sun Woman, the Moon Woman, the woman who interprets.” - Maria Sabina

My name is Reverend Donna Knutson, and I was Ordained at One Spirit Interfaith Seminary in New York City on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017...and I am going to share with you today my very long journey to Ordination, as it parallels the Syrophenician woman a bit.

How many of you have ever said a dangerous prayer before?

You know, those prayers that the Holy Spirit places on your heart?

Those prayers that you can't push away?

You need answers, or a healing, you need peace or to feel alive again?

You need to learn to forgive or to believe in hope .

You need to rearrange your day so that you begin to look more closely at your thoughts and your feelings...explore the more intimate world of God who knows everything about you.

They are prayers that come to you, out of the blue and they won't leave you alone.

They feel a bit painful and sometimes you wonder why you are whispering them, or did you really say that out loud, but it didn't seem like a prayer because your life is going on just fine. Really, just fine. This is a very personal story, but I believe that Spirit wakes us up in the right timing, and that God truly speaks to us in this world and into our personal lives. And as many of you know, I'm a spiritual writer. I write poetry and reflections, and I write very personally about how the Spirit of the Living God touches my life in the ordinary day. But there was a beginning to my call into ministry. And though I can see God woven through my entire life, there truly was a beginning when I radically woke up.

A very wise man said to me recently, “Reverend Donna, if you don't tell them about the pain, they won't know how you got to the Glory. They won't know why you only see God and why that brings you such deep joy.” So here we go...

My life was going along pretty well in the month of October of 2008, no, not really. I was trying really hard. I'd been trying a very long time and I was tired, but I needed to heal a broken heart because some years before we had lost a daughter. And because I was that child that grew up in the church, the child who found peace in passing by the big church doors and looking up at the steeple, listening to the bells play at noon, stopping outside an open window to hear the organist playing Amazing Grace, loving the church, church as living, breathing sanctuary for me...I came to the church and said “Help me. I'm so close...just listen to me...just listen to the prayer that keeps pushing so hard on my heart.” I can't even tell you what the words were because I was sweating prayer, sweating prayer from every pore of my body. I wanted God to hear me. To really, truly hear me. I felt that something inside of me had answers to the holy pain if I could just break through. We, actually, call it surrender. Pain is one of the mystical entrances into the world of God. The absolute intimacy of a God who understands that pain fully. Pain is a motivating factor in resurrection...coming back to life, saying vows to God...making amends.

In October of 2008, I had a highly mystical experience, which shook me to very core...rattled all my ideas of faith, what the Holy Spirit was, what true life was about and my heart lit on fire and that magnetic draw from Gods heart to mine has never ended. I call it my Lightning experience, as every cell in my body changed. Nothing puts the fire out. No death, fear or pain. I would never return to who I was before that experience. I would never be able to sense anything other than the presence of the living God from that day forward. My call into ministry went off that very day. But when you have a mystical experience like that, it takes time to integrate, to listen and to learn as to how to follow the movement of the Holy Spirit, and to begin to discernment and understand the pieces of my call.

There is saying more dangerous prayers. There are days of wandering. Spirit is teaching non-stop. There are twists and turns, discerning, asking the Helpers and the healers to show up in your life and to walk along of you. You are gathering knowledge, and you are also gathering courage. Because you are now following God. You need to shut down a lot of other doors and often to put blinders on so your focus is a narrow and disciplined.

I had been caught by God. Caught in ways that I had no words for. Do you remember the word, Metanoia - change your whole way of thinking. See beyond. Go deeper into the meaning, Listen with different ears. See with new eyes.

I believe that the Syrophenician woman said dangerous prayers as she was going to speak to Jesus. She wouldn't be pushed out of the way by the disciples. She wouldn't take no for an answer. She knew in her heart that Jesus was the right one to go to, that with the right amount of persistence, she would be heard, that there would be a healing. Her daughter, my daughter Kate, my broken heart no longer broken. Risking it all for this new life in Christ.

Well, once caught by God...it is forever...there is no stopping, there's no going back, no switching to the old channel on the radio. The still small voice within has a very specific sound and once you become attuned to that sound, that is what you are listening for for the rest of your life. I've always said from that moment of spiritual awakening, the Holy Spirit is the very best teacher ever. The journey with God is rigorous, and often when I tremble at the next challenge, I also am filled with wonder and amazement. Because what makes the heart break, also allows the heart to open, to be vulnerable and to risk it all. Just like the Syrophenician woman.

So, the call has gone off for me to be a minister. And as I mentioned earlier, there are helpers and healers in the world. I started looking at seminaries, and found one that I liked. It seemed to have people like me. People who had had highly mystical experiences and somehow survived God...and I don't say that lightly, because these encounters really shift a person.

Well, I eventually found a seminary on a mountain top in Oklahoma, but I was waiting for someone. I was waiting for our Reverend Eric to return from doing a presentation there. And I'm not sure Eric knew yet that I had been online reading about Sancta Sophia.

I will never forget the Sunday when Eric returned. After the service, he came up to me and he handed me a white zippered bag that said, "Sancta Sophia Seminary" on the side and he said to me, "I think you are going to want to check this out!"

I was going to seminary, and I was going to begin this new life...this call that kept pushing within me to reach Ordination. I began driving the ten hours to Sancta Sophia every few months. I'd stay on campus for a week or two and come home and do the rest of the work online. I had found my home where I could learn to express this love of the Christ. I had found other people who loved God as much as I did and they weren't crazy, they wanted to minister and to be of service. Everyone spoke of this great love, and I was at the right place. I was in love with my spiritual journey, with the mountain and the water tower that was shaped like a cross, the conversations that I had been thirsting for, and the teachers that taught me like magicians and spoke softly of their encounters with God. I studied the Old Testament and the women of the Bible. I studied the psychology of the mind and what this Light of God was all about. My teachers were rich in wisdom and wanted to share with me.

And they also wanted to know why I wore beautiful shawls all the time. I met women there who had been banned from the church because they were gay, and women who had studied the priesthood, but then were not allowed to be ordained. But, at Sancta Sophia, all were welcomed. It truly was a refuge for many women who then lived in the community after being turned away from the mainline churches.

I fed the deer in the evenings, and believed with all of my heart that within a few short years I would be ordained at my beloved Sancta Sophia Seminary. At the end of my first year of seminary, they closed the doors as they did not have the funds to keep it open. It felt like I had died. I remember calling my older son the day the seminary closed and standing on the dirt road trying to get reception, as I was in a rather remote area, pacing as I was sharing with him my great sadness and I said, "Well maybe I'll be Ordained by the time I'm 65," as that was a good ten years away and Josh said to me, "Don't you think that would be a little lazy mom!" and I said, "Ok, maybe 60" The flame did not die, and I celebrated receiving my Pastoral Studies Certification from Sancta Sophia.

After Sancta Sophia, I didn't know where else to go for seminary. Nothing was clicking, but I was firing off my questions to the God of my Heart in my meditation time. The discernment process was on once more.

There is often a call within the call and I wanted to become a Spiritual Director/a Spiritual Midwife. Rita Otis knew of a place in North Carolina called the Haden Institute.

So, I flew to North Carolina for two years and went to school in tiny little cabins in the Blue Ridge mountains. At the Haden Institute, I fell deeply in love with many forms of wisdom. After graduating, I started my drive down the interstate to San Antonio, Texas to the Mystic Heart Wisdom School. Here I met others, like myself, who wanted to expand into the literature of all sacred texts. Here the Bible would meet with the Quran, with Bhagavad Gita, Zen koans, the Nag Hammadi, and I would begin to connect more and more of the pieces as to where I needed to go for seminary. My love of preaching was beginning to grow and ministry was forming in a much broader sense. I now was branching out and hearing how the blending was happening of religions and rituals, of words and messages written within so many faiths, teaching us the same thing, but different paths. I would read the scripture of other faiths and nod in agreement that we could find common ground, and we could be brothers and sisters, like hear with Tri-Faith. Five months after I began Mystic Heart Wisdom School, I applied to seminary. I had wrestled with the demons of my own religion, and they had brought forth this amazing curiosity about my own love and adoration for the Christ, and my Christianity grew as well as my fascination with the Abrahamic faiths.

I was looking for an Interfaith Seminary. Wisdom School informed me of that. A place that would be diverse and challenging...a place that would stretch every notion of God.

## Part Two: THE CHALLENGE

Can you see the Syrophenician woman? She is walking barefoot on the dirt road, hot, tired, her heart filled with a mission. Nothing is going to stop her. Keep walking with me and listening to the story.

Everyone knows that life happens on the way to Ordination, and my first year of seminary was extremely challenging. New York City, bright lights, noise day and night, taxis speeding through the concrete city. My walking through the city streets every month, eight blocks from the hotel to the seminary, and humming some tune that reminded me of "This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine."

With the excitement of traveling to One Spirit Interfaith Seminary in New York City every month, and the aging of my mother, my time on the road grew to be significant. But, this heart fire would not stop, it just kept saying, "Keep coming, keep coming." And I did. I would fly to NYC 24 times in 22 months. Every month, 54 men and women from all over the country, and another 25 online would meet together on

the sixth floor of 247 West 36<sup>th</sup> street. When the doors opened, there would three ministers there to greet us with open arms, kisses on the cheek and, "Welcome Home" greeting us.

Month after month at seminary, I would be blessed and I would be bothered and I continued to sit alongside this very diverse community of believers, Jews, Muslim, those who were Native American and those who were just naming God as Mystery. And we worked and worked for the expansion of consciousness.

The biggest risk I took at seminary was that I wanted to be disturbed and I wanted to be changed. And the reason I prayed this prayer is because we are at a critical time in human development, as well as the earth life time, and so many of us have been called together to spiritually mature in order to take on these tasks. We need one another and to stand for something other than ourselves.

Did you hear when Reverend Chris read the Scripture? Did you hear that the Syrophoenician woman does not even have a name in the story? She is lowly. She is not supposed to be there talking to Jesus, she is pushing the limits of the time. But, the faith of the Syrophoenician woman shows us that her trust in God, also includes the ability to take care of others who need us to be brave for them.

I brought the "Phoenix Affirmations" with me to seminary, the book that Eric wrote. In small group, I would share a little bit of that at a time. Every one of every faith could relate somehow and somehow to the Phoenix Affirmations. I had them taped to the mirror in my bedroom for two years so I would read them every day.

When I went to seminary there was really a sense of being a stranger in a new land. I learned to quiet my Jesus as I was in a minority of Christians, and to hold my heart just a bit more open and to practice Holy Listening to its fullest...listening to the faults and facts, the fantasies and the future that we had all come to work towards. When I graduated from seminary, I was not only a much stronger Christian, and fully able to voice how I now felt about my own deep faith in the Christ, but also my faith in a greater vision which now joined multiple faiths. Jesus is in my bones, but now I was going to carry the power and the message of transformation with a new language of freedom that included so many others.

Half of my graduating class are gay and lesbian, and many of them had left the traditional church and were looking for a new way to experience God in community and to be of service to others like them. We danced and laughed and proclaimed their beauty over and over again, for them, to them, with them to heal their wounds. They too had been called by God and they longed to belong to a brighter world where we are all free.

Last week, Reverend Chris said these words, "God erases the boundaries" and that is what I found month by month, stretch by stretch in seminary with people of spirit so different than I am. With the eraser moving there was a new energy to create, a new freedom and far less fear from people.

With all the traveling and the push to keep going and reach the end of my schooling, I would pretty much pick up every virus and infection possible to irritate my lungs and eventually ended up in the hospital for a week my first year.

Eric, Chris and Margie came to visit me and said prayers with me. And those of you who know me really well, know how much I love a good prayer. Well, I love all prayer, and the Prayer Warriors of Countryside kept me in their hearts.

I eventually went home, but not with the blessing of my doctor. She suggested that I slow down and perhaps find a different way to attend school and all I could say to her was, "You don't understand, God keeps calling." And she did smile, but then she said, "Then let me help you." And she did, because I truly needed her help to get me through the first year. When I reached May of the first year and I was still struggling with my lungs, the doctor said, "No more flying...find another way." And she was right. So, because I have a trusty companion and I'm married to him, my husband Paul put my purple suitcase in the back of my car, opened the car door for me, I slid in, he closed the door and he drove me 23 hours to New York City so I could attend a required week long intensive so I could complete my first year of seminary. Again, the helpers and the healers appear when we need them. After the intensive, I drove myself to the Outer Banks of North Carolina and stayed for eight days by myself. My body rested and I got on my feet again.

After the first year of seminary, I would never be sick again, and the power of the Holy Spirit grew within me. My mother would pass away on April 17<sup>th</sup> of this year, my sister-in-law would die five weeks later, I would return to seminary and say my vows filled with inner peace, after a very long journey of doing hard things and believing that when we do hard things, we rise and we risk it all...for the love of our Lord God who is there every step of the way.

So, last Monday in the Rabbi's class, he used this wonderful phrase. He said, "They were clearing the pipes so that they could hear better." And I kept thinking that, that is what it was like at seminary for me. Clearing the pipes, getting rid of the goo and gunk. People became brothers and sisters, no matter what faith, no matter church, no church, no your god or my god...we truly turned over the tables and began to see one another through eyes of love. And isn't that what we are all asked to do? Get rid of the gunk and the old way of thinking...see with new eyes and hear with transformed ears that hears the still small voice within and follows the God of your heart.

Countryside Church is a rare bird in the world with beautiful colored feathers and plumes showing the world something new...Tri-Faith will deliver powerful messages throughout the world as to how God is appearing in the world and as how we as Christians are helpers and healers for all. The day I was Ordained as Reverend Donna Knutson, I was never so filled with love and gratitude for the journey given and to be able to say: Here I AM Lord...I Will Hold Your People in My Heart

Amen