More

On Discernment, Peter's Two Thoughts, and the Canaanite Woman Who Captured Israel

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The Word That Was More

The phrase that kept arriving in me through the songs this morning was a small one: *more*. We were singing about wanting *more* of God. Other voices in the service had been talking about expanding, about taking new steps, about making choices through accumulated experience. And underneath all of it was the same question. *How do we get more? And what is the more that we are looking for?*

Let me say at the outset what the *more* is not. When we received the Holy Spirit, we did not receive a fraction of him. We did not get one-third of the Spirit at conversion, with two-thirds to be unlocked at some later point by some special anointing. *We received the Spirit of God.* All of him. Paul says it plainly: *the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you* (Romans 8:11). No fragment. No partial deposit. The whole indwelling presence of the living God.

So the more we are looking for is not more Spirit. It is more of us yielded to the Spirit who has already come. It is more wisdom, more discernment, more capacity to walk out what we have already been given. There is something built into being human that requires progressive development in wisdom and understanding. Even Jesus required it. Luke tells us he grew:

"And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52).

Read that carefully. *Increased in wisdom.* The eternal Son of God, in his human nature, *grew*. He went through the developmental work that every human being goes through. He learned. He matured. He came into fuller understanding of what the Father was calling him to do. If the Son himself walked the path of developmental wisdom, then the *more* we are asking for is not strange territory; *it is the same path he walked, and walks with us*.

The Canaanite Woman, Round Two

Last week we walked carefully through Matthew 15, and the centerpiece of that message was an episode I want to revisit briefly because it lays the groundwork for what Matthew 16 and 17 will do next. Listen again to the encounter:

> And behold, a woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Him, saying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed." But He answered her not a word. And His disciples came and urged Him, saying, "Send her away, for she cries out after us." But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Then she came and worshiped Him, saying, "Lord, help me!" But He answered and said, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." And she said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour. (Matthew 15:22–28)

Look at what is happening here. Jesus quotes his own commission, *I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*, and then this Canaanite woman, *with extraordinary*

humility, recasts his words back to him. *Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.* She does not contest the commission. She does not argue that she has equal rights. She accepts the framework Jesus has laid out and then *finds a place inside it that he had not yet articulated*. The children eat at the table. The dogs eat the crumbs. *And the crumbs are still bread from the Master's hand.*

And Jesus' response is staggering. *O woman, great is your faith.* Hold on to that. He does not say *great is your argument* or *great is your wit*. He says *great is your faith*. The faith of this Gentile woman, this Canaanite, from the very people Israel had been told under Moses to *show no mercy*, is named by Jesus as faith greater than what he has found in Israel. The script is already starting to flip. The dogs at the table know the Master better than some of the children.

And what follows confirms it. Jesus then *moves into Gentile territory*. He heals there. He feeds there. The same bounty that had been set aside for the children is now distributed to the dogs at the table. When he had fed the Jewish multitude in Matthew 14, there were *five loaves and two fish*, and *twelve baskets of fragments* were taken up, twelve, the number of the tribes of Israel. Now in Matthew 15, in Gentile territory, he feeds another multitude with *seven loaves and a few small fish*, and *seven baskets of fragments* are taken up. *Seven.* The same number as the *seven nations* of Canaan that Israel had been told to dispossess in Deuteronomy 7. *The seven that were to be dispossessed are now the seven that have been fed*. The mathematics of the miracle is itself a sermon.

And one of the older brothers in our assembly leaned over to me as we were closing this morning and said, *Have you ever noticed this?* And he pointed out something in the Greek text of Matthew 15:28. When Jesus addresses the Canaanite woman with *O woman, great is your faith*, the construction is one Greek scholars have noted carefully. The verb at the heart of the

encounter (*ginomai*: let it *come to pass*, let it *become*) is sometimes used in the Septuagint for what we might call *being taken captive by an idea, being overcome by a force*. The Canaanite woman, with her words, has *overcome* the Master who came in the name of Israel. *Israel was told in Deuteronomy 7 to overcome and dispossess the Canaanites.* In Matthew 15, *a Canaanite has overcome a representative of Israel by faith*. The whole script of *dominating our enemies* has been flipped in Jesus Christ. The Master concedes to the supplicant. The Jew yields to the Canaanite. The script Israel had been handed in Deuteronomy 7 has been rewritten in the body of the woman who refused to leave the gate.

Sign From Heaven

And now into Matthew 16. The Pharisees and Sadducees come up from Jerusalem to the northern district where Jesus has been working, and notice the *strange alliance*. Pharisees and Sadducees did not normally work together. They disagreed about everything that mattered to them. The Pharisees believed in resurrection, in angels, in oral tradition; the Sadducees rejected all of it. They were rival factions whose only common cause was the elimination of Jesus. *When two parties that hate each other unite against a third party, the third party is usually the one telling the truth.*

And the question they bring is *show us a sign from heaven*:

> Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and testing Him asked that He would show them a sign from heaven. He answered and said to them, “When it is evening you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red’; and in the morning, ‘It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation

seeks after a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah."

And He left them and departed. (Matthew 16:1–4)

You can discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times. That is one of the sharpest sentences in Matthew. Jesus is saying: *you are skilled at reading the small signs and blind to the large ones*. You can predict tomorrow's weather. You cannot perceive that the Messiah is in front of you right now. The signs of God's active work are larger than the signs of barometric pressure, and you are missing them because you have trained your eyes to look for the wrong scale of evidence.

And this brings me back to a conversation I had recently with one of the brothers after a Sunday service. He said something I have not been able to shake. We can have a grand picture of the deliverance of all humanity, but how do we actually put that in practice? I can't take care of all of humanity. All I can do is the next step. All I can do is the next person who shows up at my gate. *Those* people I can do. *Those* people I can take care of.

That is what discernment is, finally, not the ability to see the cosmic arc of history but the ability to see *the person in front of you*. The Pharisees and Sadducees missed the Messiah because they were scanning the heavens for a celestial sign while he was healing a Canaanite woman's daughter in the road behind them. *The sign of the times was the bread being distributed to the dogs at the table*, and they could not see it because they were looking up instead of around.

The only sign Jesus promises them is *the sign of Jonah*:

"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40).

Jonah is the perfect prefiguration. A reluctant prophet sent to *the Gentile city of Nineveh*, swallowed by the deep, vomited back onto land, and finally delivering the word of God to a city

that *repents en masse* (Jonah 3:5). The sign of Jonah is a *Gentile-mission* sign. The Pharisees and Sadducees are being told: the only sign you will get is the sign that the Master is going down into the deep and rising back up to extend his mercy to people you would have refused to enter the same room with. It is exactly the sign their hardness of heart had made them incapable of receiving.

"Who Do You Say That I Am?"

And then Jesus walks away from the testers and turns to his disciples. They travel north to Caesarea Philippi: a town with a striking landscape: a massive cliff face with a deep, dark cave opening in it, dedicated in that era to the worship of the Greek god Pan and to a local cult around the spring that emerged from the cave. Some scholars have suggested the cave was called *the Gates of Hades*, the entrance to the underworld. *And it is at this exact location, with that cave in the background, that Jesus asks the disciples the question that will reshape the rest of their lives*:

> "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:13–18)

Two things to notice. First, the *who do you say?* is contrasted directly with *who do men say?* The general opinion is not what counts. The polled response is not what counts. Jesus dismisses the survey (*some say this, some say that*) and goes directly to the disciples' personal confession. *You. Who do you say?* That question lands the same way today. Public opinion will

tell you what most people think about Jesus. *Only your own confession is what matters in this moment.*

Second, when Peter answers, Jesus locates the *source* of Peter's confession precisely. *Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.* Peter did not arrive at the confession by reasoning. He did not piece it together from evidence. *The Father revealed it.* Confession of the Christ is *always* a revelation. It cannot come from the pulpit alone, or from the musicians, or from your mother and father, or from your church-going ancestry. The pastor cannot save you. The lineage cannot save you. The catechism cannot save you. *You need the Father to reveal the Son to you.* And once that revelation has come, the response to it is your own, *you* who say.

And then comes the wordplay that has been the subject of two thousand years of commentary. *You are Peter* (*Petros, stone*) *and on this rock* (*petra, bedrock*) *I will build My church.* The Greek distinction is real and load-bearing. Peter is *a* stone; the *bedrock* on which the church is built is *the confession* Peter has just made: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*. The church is not built on a personality; it is built on the revealed identity of the Messiah confessed by faith. And *the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it*. Notice what kind of structure *gates* are. Gates are *defensive*. *Gates do not attack; gates defend*. Jesus is saying: *the powers of death are on the defensive, and the church is on the advance*. The forces of darkness (represented by the very cave behind the disciples at Caesarea Philippi, the supposed mouth of the underworld) *cannot withstand the assault of a community built on the revealed confession of who Jesus is*.

The First Thought and the Second Thought

Peter must have walked out of that exchange feeling about as good as a man can feel. *Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah. You are Peter. On this rock I will build My church.* Three sentences. Each one heavier than the last. *The Rock.* Peter is now *The Rock*. (There is a wrestler in our day who has appropriated the title. Peter had it first.)

And then, almost immediately, Jesus turns the conversation a hundred and eighty degrees:

"From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day" (Matthew 16:21).

And Peter (*the Rock*, the one whose confession had just been called the bedrock of the church) *grabs Jesus by the cloak*. The Greek verb here (*proslabomenos*) carries the sense of *taking hold of someone to pull them aside*. Peter physically takes Jesus to the side and rebukes him:

> Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." (Matthew 16:22–23)

Two minutes earlier: blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah. Two minutes later: get behind Me, Satan. The same disciple gets both lines within the same conversation. Peter has a first thought that is right (you are the Christ) and a second thought that is wrong (you cannot be killed; that is not how this story ends). And it is the second thought, the one driven by what Peter wants the story to be, that gets him called Satan.

An older brother in our tradition used to say: the trouble with a lot of people is they never have a second thought. They have a first thought, and they think it's pretty good, and they never have a second thought. And the wisdom in that line is real. The first thought is what occurs to us instinctively. The second thought is what occurs to us when we have been corrected, when we have listened, when the voice of the Spirit has whispered something contrary to our first impulse. The first thought is uncorrected. The second thought is trained by the Father. And if Peter had stopped at his first thought (Jesus is the Christ), he would have been right. If he had been willing to receive the second thought (the Christ goes to Jerusalem to die), he would have been carried through. But he wanted to keep his first thought without receiving the correction, and that is where Satan gets a foothold.

I know exactly what that feels like. I will be honest with you. Many years ago I was driving home from a Christmas party at a friend's house when I knew, suddenly and with certainty, that all the peace I thought I had was about to end. Some change was coming that I had not asked for. And in my own private way, in the cab of my car, *I grabbed Jesus by the lapel*. I said what amounted to: *not so, Lord. This is not how this is going to go. You will not let this happen to me.*

And whatever I needed to hear from him in that moment, the answer was the same answer Peter got. *Not because Jesus was unkind, but because what God knew was that something in me needed to change for me to be carried forward into what came next.* I was holding onto a *first thought*: that my peace was the point, that my comfort was the goal, that the present arrangement of my life was what God had to preserve. And the Father wanted me to receive a *second thought*: that what was about to come, hard as it would be, was actually the path he was leading me on. *Sometimes God has to get us out of the lukewarm and into the cross.* That was

what was happening to me in the car. That was what was happening to Peter at Caesarea Philippi. The second thought is the one that carries us into the kingdom; the first thought is the one that keeps trying to drag us back to Egypt.

Take up Your Cross

> And then Jesus, having corrected Peter, broadens the correction to the whole group:
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> Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:24–26)

Hear what Jesus is saying. *The same cross I am walking toward is the cross you are walking toward.* The corrective on Peter is not just a personal correction; it is a *paradigmatic* correction. *The kingdom does not advance by avoiding the cross.* It advances by walking into it. And every disciple who follows Jesus walks the same path he walks. The Rock who has just been named Rock has to take up *his own* cross. The ones who confess that Jesus is the Christ have to *deny themselves*. There is no version of discipleship that does not include the cross.

And the paradox is that *the cross is the only way to find life*. Whoever tries to save his life will lose it. Whoever loses his life for Jesus' sake will find it. The natural human instinct, preserve at all costs, turns out to be the very instinct that destroys the life we are trying to preserve. *The fight-or-flight reflex that runs human survival is not the reflex that runs the kingdom.* The kingdom runs on the opposite reflex: *give yourself away, and you will find that the life you have given away has been multiplied back to you*.

The Mount of Transfiguration

And then comes one of the most stunning moments in the Gospels. *Six days later*, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain, and right there, in front of them, *he is transfigured*:

> Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. (Matthew 17:1–3)

Peter (Peter, who just six days earlier had been rebuked as Satan) is now invited up the mountain to see Jesus' future glory revealed in the present. The Father's correction has not disqualified him. The Father's correction has *prepared him*. And in the moment when the glory becomes visible, Peter's first instinct is again to act on his *first thought*:

"Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'" (Matthew 17:4).

Three tabernacles, one for each. Peter wants to *institutionalize* the moment. Build something. Mark the spot. Equalize the figures. Put Jesus and Moses and Elijah on the same shelf in the museum he plans to construct. The first thought again. And the Father once more interrupts:

"While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!'" (Matthew 17:5).

Hear Him. Not *Moses*. Not *Elijah*. *Hear Him.* The Father is not interested in three tabernacles. The Father wants the disciples to understand that *Jesus is not the equal of Moses and Elijah; Jesus is the one Moses and Elijah pointed to*. The Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah) converge on him. He is not one figure among three; he is *the figure to whom the other two have always been speaking*.

And there is a deeper layer here. *Moses* in his lifetime had been commanded under Deuteronomy 7 to show no mercy to the Canaanites. *Elijah* in his lifetime had called down fire from heaven on fifty soldiers, and then another fifty (2 Kings 1:9–12). *Both Moses and Elijah had operated under a covenant in which divine power was sometimes deployed against enemies through fire and the sword.* And yet (*here, on the mountain of transfiguration*) they are both standing with Jesus, who has just come from healing the daughter of a Canaanite woman and feeding a multitude of Gentiles. *The Moses who showed no mercy* and *the Elijah who called down fire* are now *standing alongside* the One who has shown mercy to the very people their own dispensations would have excluded. *The trajectory is not a contradiction; it is a fulfillment.* Moses and Elijah served the early stages of God's purpose. Jesus is consummating it. And the voice from the cloud says: *Hear Him*.

"Do You Not Know What Manner of Spirit You Are Of?"

Now jump for a moment to Luke's account of the same journey, because Luke preserves a detail Matthew does not. As Jesus and the disciples are heading toward Jerusalem after the Mount of Transfiguration, they pass through a Samaritan village:

> Then it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem, and sent messengers before His face. And as they went, they entered a village of the Samaritans, to prepare for Him. But they did not

> receive Him, because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?” But He turned and rebuked them, and said, “You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them.” (Luke 9:51–56)

Just as Elijah did. James and John have just seen Elijah standing on the mountain six days earlier. They know the story of Elijah and the fifty soldiers. And in this Samaritan moment, when the village refuses to receive Jesus, they immediately reach for the Elijah precedent. *Lord, shall we call down fire?* The Elijah-paradigm still seems to them a usable paradigm. They have not yet realized that the One who stood with Elijah on the mountain is operating from *a different spirit* than Elijah was.

And Jesus’ rebuke is exact. *You do not know what manner of spirit you are of.* Whatever you think you are doing by reaching for the fire, you are *not* doing what the Spirit of the Son of Man does. *The Son of Man did not come to destroy lives; he came to save them.* That is the corrective the Mount of Transfiguration was supposed to install in them, *Hear Him*, and they have not yet absorbed it. Six days of fresh memory of the Father’s voice from the cloud, and they are already reaching for the fire from heaven. *We are slow learners*, every one of us.

And what this tells me is that the *Spirit of the Lord Jesus is not the same spirit as the spirits of the old covenant prophets*. Moses and Elijah did what they did in their dispensations. But *Jesus’ Spirit*, the Spirit of the Son of Man who came to save and not to destroy, *is the Spirit poured out on us at Pentecost*. And the manner of that Spirit is *salvation*, not destruction. Forgiveness, not retaliation. Crumbs from the Master’s table for the dogs at the gate, not fire from heaven on the village that refused hospitality. *Hear Him.*

The Spirit of Truth

And this brings us to John 14, where Jesus, on the very night he is betrayed, lays out what the disciples will receive *after* he is gone:

> Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:1–3)

And as the disciples ask their questions, *Lord, we do not know where You are going; how can we know the way?* (John 14:5), and *Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us* (John 14:8); Jesus answers each one and then promises the Helper:

> And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever: the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. (John 14:16–17)

And later in the same conversation:

> "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him" (John 14:23).

We will come to him and make Our home with him. Father and Son taking up residence in the believer. This is the *more* we have been asking for. Not a fragment of God added to our existing arrangement, but the *whole household of God* moving into the human heart and beginning to direct the traffic. And the *Spirit of truth*, the same Spirit Jesus walked in, the Spirit who corrected Peter's first thought, the Spirit who said *Hear Him* on the mountain, the Spirit

who rebuked the fire-from-heaven reflex of James and John, is the Spirit who now guides us into *all truth* (John 16:13).

The decisions we make and the progressions we walk through, both as individuals and as a community of faith, *require* this Spirit. Without him, we will reach for the wrong precedents. We will mistake our first thoughts for the will of God. We will ask for fire when we should be asking for the crumbs to be passed under the table. We will build three tabernacles when the Father wants us simply to *hear*.

The Next Person at the Gate

So how does the *more* arrive in us in practice? Not through visions in the clouds. Not through dramatic revelations on mountaintops, though those things do happen. The *more* arrives through *the next person at our gate*.

As we closed this morning, a request came up to pray for a family that had just received the news that someone close to them had taken his own life that very morning. *That* is what *the next person at the gate* looks like, in flesh and blood. A family I cannot help across thousands of miles of human grief. A young man whose girlfriend is suddenly carrying the unbearable. A series of relatives and friends whose Sunday morning has been shattered.

And here is the point. *I cannot fix any of that.* I cannot reach across the distance. I cannot reverse the morning. But *I can pray,* with my brothers and sisters in this assembly, that the Spirit who descended at Pentecost would descend on that family today. I can take the *next step* the Spirit is putting in front of me. I can ask, when the next phone call comes, whether the Spirit is asking me to make a visit, send a meal, write a card, sit silently with someone who needs silence more than words. *The grand vision of redemption is not abstract; it crystallizes into the next concrete person whose grief I am being asked to enter.*

How often do we miss those people. How often do we walk past the one at our gate because our eyes are scanning the heavens for a sign while the sign is sitting on the step in front of us. The Pharisees and Sadducees missed the Messiah because they were looking for a celestial demonstration; we miss the work of the Spirit because we are looking for *more* in a form we have imagined in advance. *The Spirit is already moving in the next person who is waiting for us to notice them.*

So let me close this where it began. *What is the more we are looking for?* Not more Spirit; he has been fully given. Not more revelation, the Father has revealed his Son. Not more authority, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given. The *more* we are looking for is *more of us yielded to what has already come*. More willingness to receive the second thought when the first thought has been corrected. More humility to recognize the Canaanite woman at the gate as the one with greater faith. More attention to the voice from the cloud that says *hear Him*. More refusal of the fire-from-heaven reflex when the village will not receive us. More compassion for the dog under the table who is, in fact, the one whose faith the Master is about to commend.

That is the more. That is what discernment looks like in practice. And the Spirit who has been poured out into our hearts is sufficient to walk us, step by step, person by person, gate by gate, into the fuller life that the One who began the work has promised to complete.

An older brother leaned over to me as the closing song began this morning and said: Have you ever seen this? Deuteronomy 7 told Israel to overtake and capture and dispossess the Canaanites. And when Jesus responds to the Canaanite woman with ‘O woman, great is your faith,’ the script gets flipped. This Israel, this representative of Israel, has been taken captive. By

the Canaanite. By her faith. The whole script of dominating our enemies has been flipped in Jesus Christ.

That is the gospel in one sentence. We do not overcome our enemies. The Spirit, working through our humility and our love and our crumbs-under-the-table faith, overcomes the world. And the people we once called enemies turn out to be the very ones whose faith ends up teaching us what faith looks like. So let us go out this week with our eyes open. Who is at your gate? Find them. Be present to them. The next step is enough.