

Text: Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus steps onto foreign turf, travels outside the border of Jewish land, passing into the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon. Canaanites were the long-term adversaries of the Jewish people; somewhat similar to Palestinian and Israeli tensions in our day. There was a long history of land disputes, violent uprisings, political upheaval. There were clear dividing lines, and tensions surrounding those lines, between Canaanite folk and Jewish folk. Jesus walked directly into all that.

A Canaanite woman, having no standing to talk to any man in public, much less a Jewish man, bursts out, shouting, "Show me mercy, Son of David. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession." In my life, I have never seen tighter human bonds than between a mother and her daughter, or a mother and her son. There is something indelible, ineffable, unbreakable, potentially explosive if threatened. Her daughter suffers horribly and she breaks multiple rules, shouting out to this foreigner who's been known to cast out demons: show me mercy, Son of David.

I invite us to walk, humbly, into this story. We have difficulty with "different people". Racial tensions, stirred up again by recent events, remind us that we still have a long way to go. We are reminded that we are all learners in building relationships across lines of difference; awkward and embarrassed at times, flawed though well-intentioned most times. How do you react to tattooed and pierced younger people? What are your instincts when you see someone dressed in Muslim or Arab clothing? The Canaanite woman rushed toward Jesus, shouting for his mercy to be given to her ailing daughter. "But he didn't respond to her at all." Maybe that's a not-bad first step. He didn't walk away. He didn't tune her out.

When I was in seminary, in Chicago, being young and naïve, I took an evening course taught by a Catholic priest whose ministry was to the night people in downtown Chicago: prostitutes, transvestites, society's misfits, the "different folk" who came out in public, after the "normal folks" were at home asleep. One night, late at night, a small group of us went on a field trip with him, to his place of ministry. It was different, for sure. We left normal to enter a foreign land. But these were Jesus people too, I told myself. We met some of the police who patrolled the area; we rode in squad car, talked with them about their beat. At one point, they arrested a woman for prostitution, put her in the back seat of the squad car right next to me. My seminary buddy, on the other side of me, liked to remind me, how high I jumped off the seat when she sat down next to me.

Jesus didn't respond to the shouting Canaanite mother. Maybe that was better than other alternatives. "His disciples came and urged him, "Send her away; she keeps shouting after us." These are the same guys who wanted to send away five thousand men plus women and children, but Jesus said: "Bring them to me." Jesus **doesn't** send her away. He replies, "I've been sent only to the lost sheep, the people of Israel." Clearly, Jesus knew his mission, understood his call. (I came to understand what my

call was not, that night riding in the backseat of the squad car.) “But she knelt (bent the knee, in worship and honor, inviting a sacred light to show) and said, “Lord, help me.” She is now pushing all the Savior buttons. So desperate to bring relief and wellness to her pain-stricken daughter. She bows down, knocking down gender, cultural, racial barriers and pleads: “Lord, help me.” What’s a Savior to do?

We know it’s not simple, overcoming long-held stereotypes, retraining those well-learned reactions, opening up new compassionate sensitivities with persons who are different, assigning equal humanity to those we’ve put in a separate box. Immigrants. Muslims. Gay and Lesbian. Transgender. Mentally ill. Ex-convicts. Brown, black, native, white. Societal change is slow. Church change is slow. Personal change is slow.

This fall, we will study the book *Waking Up White*, written by a white, upper middle-class woman about her personal, humbling transformation as she admits and reinterprets some of her white privileged baggage that separated her from people who are different. Change begins at a personal level; the only person we can change is our self. It is not simple, quick, or pain-free.

For whatever reason, Jesus replies to the Canaanite woman’s cry for help with a statement that sounds unkind, dismissive, even insulting: “It is not good to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” Setting up a binary, in which one is rated against the other. Children better than dogs. Jews better than Canaanites. Male and female. Slave and free. Jew and Greek. All are one in Christ Jesus, scripture teaches. Don’t we know better, that there is no superior category, no better or lesser grouping? All are equal in Christ. But, I still don’t know if I’d react any differently if I was in the back of the police car today.

This amazing Canaanite woman, driven by unceasing love for her stricken daughter, unwilling to back down or allow her pain to turn into attack or anger, showing amazing composure and unrelenting desire to have this man heal her daughter, says, “Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off the table.” Leftovers: they’re more than enough.

If one of us was ever incarcerated. If one of us suffered from serious mental illness. If one of our children, grandchildren or if one of our Sunday School children ever declared that he or she was gay, lesbian or transgender. Would our love, or God’s love change one iota? So why do those categories of difference create barriers? What does it matter? What does Jesus do? Unceasing love for his ailing daughters, hurting sons, troubled children.

Both the Canaanite woman and Jesus stayed in the conversation. They could have easily walked away, but neither did. Did not reject or tune out the other. Did not allow the habits or customs of their time define their relationship nor restrict their future, or their children’s future. They hung in there, together. Revolutionary. Transforming. Healing. Faithful.

“Woman, you have great faith. It will be just as you wish.’ And right then her daughter was healed.” Her daughter is healed and the prevailing social winds, which stink, gain a breath of fresh air.

In her book, *Waking Up White*, the author, Debby Irving, describes a time when she thoughtlessly misspoke the name of the daughter of a black friend. It was completely accidental: she just blanked on her name, and used, by mistake, the name of another black classmate. Afterward, Debby was horrified. A white person mistaking a black person for another one is weighted with all kinds of racist baggage. The minor slight can escalate to a big thing, a major slam. Driven by her troubled conscience, she called the other mother to apologize. They kept the conversation going, worked through the perceived breach, with mutual honor and humility. She sums up the episode with this line: “This situation stinks, but I want to be in it **with** you so I can get out of it **with** you.”

That line fits Jesus’s encounter with the Canaanite woman in Tyre and Sidon. The situation stinks – your daughter’s illness, the racial, cultural, ethnic divides – but they stay in it together and they come out of it together: the daughter, the mother, Jesus. We gain the fresh air, as Gentiles who are adopted into the circle of grace, by faith alone. May we breathe that fresh air in our ongoing encounters with Jesus’s other people, as persons and as a church, knowing it will not be simple, or easy, or pain-free. “This situation stinks, but I want to be in it with you so I can get out of it with you.” Then and there, her daughter became well.