

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

In this morning's lesson from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is disturbingly hostile to someone outside of his own ethnic and religious tradition, a Canaanite woman who pleads for Jesus' healing for her daughter afflicted with a demon. To the Jews of that time, including Jesus who was Jewish, the Canaanites were sort of godless heathens. So here's a little history of that whole relationship. We have this morning's reading in Genesis recounting how the people of Israel had come to be living in Egypt, to escape the horrible famine in their homeland, the land of Canaan, in what is now the Middle East. Then, fast forward 400 years, and the Hebrews' comfortable life in Egypt collapses into slavery, from which Moses helps them escape and leads them through the Arabian wilderness, finally landing back approximately where they had come from in Canaan. There they find people occupying the land - surprise surprise - AND worshipping gods of fertility and nature instead of worshipping Yahweh, the one true God they had followed through the wilderness. They felt as though God had promised THEM the land. So after many years of conflict and warfare between the two groups, our Hebrew scriptures claim that the Canaanites were utterly wiped out and the land of Israel arose according to God's promise. Now the reality is that probably the Canaanites were forced off of the better land in the region and had to live around the edges, eking out a living. So, fast forward again maybe 1,000 years, and the Canaanites in Jesus' time were still treated as second-class citizens at best, and generally despised as inferior. Today of course we would call this bigotry and even racism against indigenous people, the people who had lived there a long time.

AND, our Canaanite woman, who wasn't even dignified with a name in this story, was doubly cursed because as a woman in that culture she had no personal or property rights, no independence, and no legal or social status apart from a man. The religious authorities certainly had no time for her, and Jesus' disciples were at best annoyed and provoked by her loud cries for help for her daughter's healing.

Jesus at first ignores her. He sees her as an "other," an outsider, not one of the children of Israel, not one of his lost sheep. "Don't bother me, I don't have the time, I have to draw the line somewhere..." You know, we get it - we have to draw lines in our lives all the time. And then of course, when he does speak to her, we cringe with our modern sensibilities, as he uses harsh, demeaning words, comparing her to a dog, which was a name for an impure outcast, the lowest of the low. What happens next, however, is pretty remarkable.

Now, we hear throughout the Gospels that Jesus' message was often misunderstood. The disciples were often confused by the metaphors in his parables. (I think of the Monty Python movie and somebody saying, "Did he say blessed are the cheesemakers?" No.) Also the religious leaders saw Jesus as a threat trying to dismantle tradition, order, and righteousness. And then there were the larger crowd that milled around him, waiting for the next miracle or spectacle. It all seemed noisy, chaotic, dramatic. But then we meet the Canaanite woman, who completely comprehends what's important - she has this laser-like clarity about the physical and spiritual needs of her daughter and the abilities of this man of God right in

front of her. After Jesus says to her, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” her response is quick and powerful: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” We’ve been hearing for weeks now in the Gospels about how small things can make a big difference, a tiny grain of mustard seed becomes a big tree, a shred of faith can move mountains. Well, this woman knew that a few crumbs from the master’s table could heal a young girl and bring everyone closer to God. To Jesus’ ears, this woman was brilliant, an inspiring example of faith, unflinching in her conviction of God’s grace and healing power. She had met his skepticism, his put-down, with both gracious humility and towering dignity, calmly calling for a just response from the Messiah and claiming her and her daughter’s rightful places in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is moved by how thoroughly she grasps the essence of his message and ministry, and his heart is changed, is converted, by her witness. And he says, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

As my colleague in ministry, the Rev. Br. Richard E. Helmer says: “Today’s Gospel is not about faith in what we deserve. It is about faith in the grace we need. It is about struggling for justice, righteousness, and dignity right in God’s face. It is about an insistent, almost obnoxious faith that will continue to pursue truth even at the expense of all cultural and societal boundaries. It is about our wrestling directly with a God ‘in whom we live and move and have our being’ for our own healing.” ([Sermons that Work](#) website, Proper 15A, 1999)

“Do you find yourself spiritually alone, muttering, ‘Thy will be done,’ to a distant lofty Lord enthroned above?” Do you believe that God doesn’t care about your smallest concerns or worries, but that you are pretty much on your own? Then this is the Gospel for you! I invite you to become more like that Canaanite woman, who persistently asked from Jesus what she needed, and received it in abundance.

I invite you to put your faith not only in a transcendent Creator who made the stars and the galaxies, and this Fragile Earth our Island Home, but put your faith also in a very immanent, face-to-face God, in that amazing Spirit who is active in the deepest fibers of our being, and in Christ, our Savior, who knows us from the inside out, knows our beginnings and our ends, and is willing to hear and respond to our pleas for help on any and all levels.

In the name of God. **AMEN.**