

Sermon on Matthew 15.21-28

Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman is unsettling.

This is a very difficult gospel passage. It is hard to listen to as it seems to go against the very grain of who we think Jesus was and is.

We so often have an image of this Jesus who loves little children and is kind to animals. The ultimate good guy. Somebody you could bear your soul to and who has boundless patience and compassion.

Except that's not the Jesus we encounter this morning. We want to shout out 'who are you and what have you done with the Jesus we (think) we know!!'

If this was a 21st century crowd scene somebody would have been recording this this encounter on their phone and posted it to Youtube only to be endlessly run and rerun for all eternity. You can see the title now 'Jesus' off day ... '

There were some advantages to being born in the 1st century!

What makes this passage so difficult is how harsh Jesus sounds, how harsh and downright rude. First he refuses to answer a woman pleading for his help, then he denies that he has anything to offer 'her kind', and finally he likens her to a dog. That's just downright rude in anyone's book!

The Canaanite woman models the most admirable human behaviour in this encounter unlike Jesus or his disciples for that matter.

She shows willingness to be vulnerable by seeking help from a longstanding foe whom she knows despises her because of national and racial divisions.

She asks for help for her daughter, not for herself.

She is persistent in the face of insults and rejection, for her daughter's sake.

The Canaanite woman has the best lines in the story, especially her last one.

"Call me dog," she says, "but even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table." She is the clear underdog who wins the prize of highest value for any mother, Jew or despised Canaanite -- her child's health and well-being.

Furthermore, this Canaanite woman demonstrates that she has a better grasp of Jesus' identity than the hand-selected disciples do at this point in the narrative.

The problem is however that *she is a Canaanite*, one of the great unwashed with whom observant Jews of Jesus' time had little contact.

She comes from the coastal region of Syria, where strange gods are worshipped and ritual laws of cleanliness are unknown. She is a Gentile, in other words not a Jew, and as such she is both an outsider and an untouchable.

Earlier in Matthew, it is Jesus himself who warns his disciples to steer clear of Gentiles, reminding them that they have been sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.

The only catch is that the lost sheep do not seem to want to be found.

In spite of Jesus' undivided attention to them, they are not rushing to respond to his shepherd's call.

A quick overview of his ministry so far:

Well it didn't start off that well... Jesus has been thrown out of his hometown for saying things that they disagreed with and even his own family seems to have distanced themselves from him.

He has recently received news that his cousin John has lost his head to a dancing girl and no matter how much distance he tries to put between himself and the crowds they just keep turning up and following him and he ends up feeding 5000 of them out of his own resources with the help of a small child.

Peter constantly needs rescuing either from nearly drowning at sea or through his impulsive behaviour causing offence.

Everywhere Jesus turns he finds need — need and people who want what he can do for them but who remain blind to who he is.

He is at the frayed end of a rope and all but used up. Well that's ministry for you!!

Then to cap it all this woman turns up. It seems like the final straw... She's a foreigner, not one of them *at all*.

Could it get much worse. Well yes it can. She won't be quiet and she won't leave him alone.

Enough is enough. He draws the line, as surely as if he had leaned down and traced it in the dust at his feet. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" he says to the woman, and that is supposed to be that.

Jesus was very human, as well as being the son of God, and it's not hard to hear the frustration and weariness in this exchange. He was a long way from home. Every time he turned around somebody wanted something from him, but at the same time no one wanted what he most wanted to give— namely himself, in terms of who he was for them and not only in terms of what he could *do* for them.

It's not hard to imagine how that feels, even if you do not happen to be the Messiah— to be surrounded by appetites, by people who want your money and your time and your gifts but who do not seem much interested in who you really are; to be confused about what you are supposed to do, how much you are supposed to give, and to be worried about whether there is enough of you to go around.

If we are honest we can see ourselves mirrored in Jesus' attitude toward the Canaanite woman, and it's not our best selves.

We know very well the tendency to define and fear an "other" on the basis of skin colour, nationality, class, or creed, deeply ingrained stereotypes that go back generations or even centuries.

We resent being bothered by the concerns of those people. We have our own children to care for.

When they persist, insisting on equal treatment and justice for their children, we resort to racial slurs and insults.

And we are very good at justifying our actions rather than admitting the prejudice that persists.

But the Canaanite woman will not stay on her side of the line.

She remains persistent and then she does a shocking thing:

She calls Jesus by name,

"O Lord, Son of David"... It's the title reserved for the Messiah, the title his own people have withheld from him .

When this woman names him as the Son of David, she names something that his own disciples have failed to recognise.

Then even when she is cruelly rebuked by Jesus she comes out with the one liner to end all one liners..." Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table'.

Something snaps in Jesus. He blinks and looks again. His anger dissolves.

Something in him is rearranged and changed forever, a change you can hear in his voice. " O woman, great is your faith' he says to her."Be it done for you as you desire'.

The line drawn between them disappears. He comes to new understanding of who he is and what he has been called to do. He is no longer a Messiah called only to the lost sheep of Israel but God's chosen redeemer to the whole world.

Jews and Gentiles alike. Beginning with the Canaanite woman.

Through *her* faith he learns that God's purpose for him is much bigger than he imagined. The old boundaries will not contain his new vision.

Isn't that the way it goes? Over and over God's call to us means pushing old boundaries, embracing outsiders, giving up the notion that there is not enough to go around.

We may resist, we may even lose our tempers, but the call of God is insistent, as insistent as the Canaanite woman who would not leave Jesus alone. The call of God keeps after us, calling us by name, until finally we step over the lines we have drawn for ourselves and discover a whole new world on the other side.

In Jesus we see the very best of human potential in relationships with others, even those we avoid and fear.

We see in Jesus the possibility of perceiving common humanity where we could see only difference.

And when we encounter the "other" as one who shares our humanity, we can never see them as "other" again.

The Canaanite woman has the best lines in this story, but Jesus has the last word: "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

Not "Canaanite woman" but simply "woman."

She will never be defined by national or racial or religious prejudice again.

She is now a mother like any other who desperately seeks help for her child.

And for this mother's sake, Jesus heals her daughter. And perhaps Jesus heals us, too, from the temptation to hang on to old stereotypes and habits that prevent us from embracing our common humanity.

Reading Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman reminds the church that God is constantly entering new territory and breaking boundaries.

This God is in the unsettling business of meeting outsiders and granting them not just a crumb, but a place at the table.

Amen.