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Ah, that Canaanite woman. Pushy, arrogant, shoving her way in among the followers of Jesus, begging relief for her daughter, possessed by a demon. Uncharacteristically, Jesus discounts her very real need – “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” The disciples aren't much better: “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.”

What a troublesome woman, that Canaanite.

“It is not fair,” Jesus said, “to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.”

“Yes, Lord” – she called him Lord! – “yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.”

Loud-mouthed, assertive, a real troublemaker, that Canaanite woman.

Who does she think she is, demanding healing for her troubled daughter from the Messiah?  
She's not even an Israelite! She's from Canaan!

She's from Cuba!

She's from Mexico!

She's from Iran!

She's from the Ukraine!

*She's not one of us!*

And she's a woman!

She's black!

She's poor!

She doesn't deserve the children's food!

But... this pushy woman called him “Lord.”

Now remember, Matthew was written years after Jesus' death – in the late first century. And so this was a timely issue in the early church, for it was a church in transition. Remember, too, that the early church was Jewish but by now the church was beginning to welcome Gentiles.

Jewish and Gentile Christians were struggling with the proper place of Jewish law in the life of the church.

And the woman who called Jesus "Lord" was a clear sign that God's salvation was meant for *all* people, *all* nations. And she is a clear sign that we, too, are meant to care for *all* people of *all* nations. Not just "people like us." *All* people.

God keeps drawing bigger circles. God's circles are not meant to keep anyone out. God's circles are meant to invite people in. And isn't that a good thing for us all? For if that weren't the case, we might risk finding ourselves on the outside.

Who's in, who's out – the Canaanite woman started outside the circle. And her faith brought her inside.

But even before that she was part of God's growing circle. To some she was beyond the boundaries of God's love, God's compassion; but even *she* recognized that she deserved a chance at grace. And that grace has no boundaries.

Jesus' reactions toward the woman are confusing. I mean, they just don't sound like the Jesus I know and love, the Jesus who speaks over and over again of mercy and compassion and justice for the poor and the outcast. So what's going on? Is he just pulling our leg to prove a point? I mean, he's fairly well denigrated the woman by comparing her to a dog, which would certainly be embarrassing to you or me. (Trust me: I know what this feels like.)

Usually, there's a hostile question from some onlooker to Jesus, to which Jesus responds with a correcting statement which anyone would be hard put to deny. In this story, though, it seems to be *Jesus* who provides the hostile saying and the *woman* who trips him up and corrects him.

Perhaps he is using her, drawing her out, begging her faith as an example to others. I'm still not clear about his harsh words, but I do suspect that the story of this woman's faith, her acknowledgement of the "Lord, son of David," her kneeling worship of Jesus – I do suspect that the result, the healing of her daughter by Jesus, is precisely the point: That God's mercy extends to *all* people, not just the chosen people of Israel.

In other words, I don't think we can apply modern notions of sexism and racism to Jesus, but I do think that the story challenges the sexism and racism of us modern readers. We might see just a glimpse of our own frailties in Jesus – and we might struggle to enter into the life of the woman from Canaan, to experience the life of "the other."

Who are the Canaanites among us today? Who is less worthy of our compassion, our justice, our mercy? Anyone? Anyone?

Our national and state legislatures face daunting economic tasks. Reasonable changes need to be made in the way we acquire revenue and the way we spend. But I am quite saddened when I hear legislators call for cuts in expenditures that would most hurt the vulnerable – the

elderly, children, the poor. Some of them call themselves Christian – but I’m not sure they’ve read the Gospels. Or at least they haven’t read them in the same way I have.

Because God’s mercy is a model for our own. God’s mercy in an ever-widening circle encourages us to widen our own circles of care, to extend our compassion beyond “people like us,” to cry for justice by standing with the poor and the minority and the disenfranchised and to say “Enough! We must care for one another! There are no Canaanites!”

I think of children in border states – and quite possibly right here in Michigan, as well. The governments are challenged by legal and illegal immigrants and some would impose draconian measures denying health care and a just legal system to those on the margin.

I fear that such a trend may get worse. There are states now where being a Good Samaritan can land you in jail: In Alabama, if you pick up an injured person on the side of the road and you’re pulled over by the police, they can check – and if the injured person, who you were only trying to take to the emergency room, if that injured person cannot prove citizenship, the passenger will be charged with trespass and you will be charged with smuggling.

I am pleased to read that three bishops, including our own in Alabama, Bishop Parsley, have denounced the legislature, the governor, and the law.

But it’s scary and it’s depressing and it’s frightening – and I’m white. It is hard to imagine how it feels to be a person of color or a person with an accent.

Who are the Canaanites we need to invite into God’s circle? Who are the Canaanites in our own society, who are rejected and oppressed and treated like dogs?

We need more pushy Canaanite women.

And we need to respond with mercy.

Amen.