

Proper 15A-26 Sermon
August 16, 2026
Trinity Episcopal Church
The Rev. Sarah D. Thomas

Yes, you heard that right. Jesus wasn't being very nice in today's Gospel story. In fact, he is being downright offensive. Matthew tells us Jesus is talking to a Canaanite woman, a gentile, someone outside the Jewish faith, someone considered a pagan "other." She is a desperate mother asking Jesus to heal her daughter and he doesn't respond to her request. He doesn't even acknowledge her existence. When she persists, he calls her a "dog," which was an ethnic slur; an insult.. How is this possible? How is Jesus, the perfect sinless divine son of God, able to behave in this way, and what is this story doing in scripture?

Believe it or not, this is one of my favorite stories in the Bible because it shows us just how human Jesus was. Many people, including some Bible scholars, are quite uncomfortable with Jesus being this human. They try to soften this story or somehow explain it away. Here are some examples, according to Rev. Anna Carter Florence:

"Jesus was just joking. He was just engaging in a little Middle Eastern banter. He was just testing the woman to see if she really did have faith. He didn't mean she was literally a dog! This is just a literary device." Etc. But this story is much more interesting if we take it at face value, if we allow Jesus to be the full human that he was. We see a side of Jesus who is capable of "othering" someone; capable of being dismissive and rude; someone who is not being inclusive; someone who changes his mind. This complicates our idea of Jesus, doesn't it?

Last January, Elizabeth and I participated in a storytelling workshop that involved telling stories from our lives in connection to the stories from Jesus' life. We sat in a circle and answered various story prompts. For example, "Tell a story about a time when _____.") When we were done, it was Jesus' turn to answer the same story prompt. The facilitator read Jesus' story, creatively written in the first person: "...So there I was, staring at that huge crowd and suddenly I was feeling full of doubt...). The stories went something like that. The leaders of this workshop got some push back from the participants at the end. Some people were uncomfortable with hearing Jesus speak in the first person using contemporary language. They were anxious about using imagination with what Jesus' human experience might have been, which included many human feelings.

Listening to the pushback, it struck me that many people like the idea of a divine Jesus more than a human one. In some ways, Jesus has become an untouchable deity and when that happens, we lose our ability to connect with him. He was fully divine, but he was also fully human, which means he experienced life just like the rest of us. And he even made mistakes. Let's go back to the gospel story.

The woman, a Canaanite, an outsider, sees Jesus, knows who he is, and starts shouting and running after him and the disciples. She is loud and noisy, determined to get their attention. She cries out, "Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David." She does this out of respect and shows him she knows who he is, using the name for the Jewish Messiah, "Son of David." She pleads with

him to heal her daughter. He immediately dismisses her. As far as he understands it, it seems, his mission is to find the lost sheep of the house of Israel. She is on the outside and therefore not his concern. She, however, does not accept this. She kneels down and just says, “Lord, help me.” A simple respectful plea – human to human. “Help me.” In calling him just “Lord” this time, it is as if she is reminding him that he has come for all people. He is her Lord, too. And Jesus says, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs,” meaning: “I have come for the children of Israel and not for you. You are outside my circle of caring and healing.” It is shocking that she doesn’t storm off because his comment is so offensive and cruel, dehumanizing, really. But she doesn’t give up. She is a mother with a suffering child and she knows what she has to do: keep her cool, stand her ground, and get creative. So she uses Jesus’ own words and opens them up: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” She still believes he can heal her daughter if he chooses to. She is somehow willing to be called a dog as long as some of Jesus’ healing crumbs fall to her. It is an act of infuriating humility mixed with audacious courage, isn’t it? And it hits Jesus. It gets to him and suddenly he sees things differently. Jesus says, “Woman, great is your faith.” Some translations have him say, “O woman,” as if that “O” is his big realization. “O, Woman, how blind I have been.” And he immediately heals her daughter.

It isn’t so much that she changes Jesus’ mind about who *she* is. She changes his mind about who *he* is, and she helps him see who *she* believes him to be: the one who came for all, not just for a chosen few. Her faith in him expands his own understanding of his vocation, his mission, and for whom that mission is. During the time of Matthew’s gospel, the community was wrestling with this very question. Who belongs and how? In this story, we see Matthew trying to expand a nationalistic ideology of who his community understood themselves to be. Jesus had come for all. And it is a woman from the outside who expands this vision.

The Canaanite woman does what marginalized people have had to do over and over again: stand in their dignity despite discrimination, and persist until those in power see their full humanity and deserved inclusion. “O, woman, great is your faith” Jesus says. So often it is people on the outside, on the margins, that call those in the center to their true mission. And Matthew calls this being faithful.

Four other times in Matthew’s gospel Jesus says, “You of little faith.” He says this when people are being anxious, afraid, doubtful, or caught in a scarcity mindset. But here, we have a woman who is so persistent and so believing in Jesus’ power to heal, that she challenges his own idea of who he is. That is great faith, according to Matthew’s Jesus.

Which makes me wonder... If it is faithful to be this persistent with Jesus, to remind him of what his mission is and whom he came for, might we be invited to do the same? How might this change how we pray, for example ... how we talk to Jesus now? Even though I am a priest, I can struggle with this too, sometimes doubting the efficacy of prayer. But here we have Matthew showing us a woman of great faith who persists with what she wants and believes Jesus can do for her daughter. She is bold with her faith and inspires me to be, too. Here we have a definition of faith: advocating persistently, boldly for those in great need.

In today’s opening hymn we sang: “In Boldness look to God for help, like womenfolk who dared

to ask that Jesus heal a child, that crumbs of grace be shared, that outcast ones be welcomed to the feast God has prepared.” The hymn lists other characters in scripture, all women, who challenged norms because they saw clearly who Jesus was when others didn’t and they claimed their place in his circle of grace: the woman who poured expensive perfume over Jesus’ feet and wiped them with her hair, anointing him for burial even though she was judged for doing so; the hemorrhaging woman deemed unclean who reached out and touched the hem of Jesus’ garment anyway, trusting he would see her and heal her, even as society cast her out; the Samaritan woman at the well whom Jesus crossed boundaries to treat with dignity, and she ran to tell her village that she had met the messiah, the first character in scripture to do so; Mary of Bethany, who sat at Jesus’ feet to listen to his teachings instead of running to the kitchen to take on the typical female role; Mary Magdalene, who was the only one who stayed with Jesus the whole way through the crucifixion and even the morning after at his grave, when he appeared to her and she became the first person to proclaim the resurrection to the disciples. And today’s gospel story – a powerful example of an outsider claiming her place as worthy of receiving Jesus’ attention and acceptance and healing.

At first, Jesus sees the Canaanite woman as a category instead of as a person. She is a “Canaanite” and therefore not worthy of his attention. Even Jesus was capable of being stuck in his 1st century Mediterranean context with his own tribal boundaries. It makes me think of today’s rising authoritarianism that tries to get us to see people in this same way - as categories. Rev. Jen Butler, founder of Faith in Public Life, wrote just this week how authoritarianism is trying to get us to look at others and see categories instead of people: illegal, criminal, MAGA, liberal, etc. When people become categories, we become more capable of treating each other as less deserving – similar to how Jesus speaks to the Canaanite woman at first. As a tool of resistance to authoritarianism, Butler asks us to “dignify” each other, to look at people, even our opponents, as the individuals they are: mother, child, human being. She writes, “Authoritarianism continually asks us to shrink the circle of people whose suffering counts.” “Asserting human dignity is dangerous to authoritarianism,” she says. And that is exactly what the Canaanite woman was doing – asserting her own dignity, which allows Jesus to see her as a scared mother in need.

Jen Butler writes: “Find the person our politics is teaching you not to see. Learn their name. Listen to their story. Feed them. Welcome them. Defend them. Stand beside them. On the bus. At the grocery store. Planned, unplanned. Make eye contact. Smile. Build out from there. This includes how we treat those under the spell as well. And when you confront someone doing harm, tell the truth about the harm without surrendering your own humanity in the process.”

Isn’t this what the Canaanite woman does? She reminds Jesus who he is. But she does so standing in her dignity, remaining respectful, getting creative, and appealing to his humanity and his divinity. And Jesus responds with, “O woman, great is your faith.”

So let us listen more closely to those who are on the outside of the center, calling our systems, our religion, our policies, our attention, to their higher calling, so that all may find the healing and the dignity that humans, and all created beings, deserve. And let us persistently come to Jesus with our own needs and with the needs of others, as well.