

## Overcoming Our Racism

[Text - Matthew 15:21-28]

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No matter how you slice it or spin it, Jesus' response to the Canaanite woman's desperate plea for help is extremely harsh. Even though many Israelites called the Canaanites "unclean, foreign *dogs*," Jesus certainly knows better. And while women in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century were treated as being vastly inferior to men, Jesus also knows better than that. Throughout his ministry, Jesus shows tremendous respect for women; and he also shows a deep understanding of how Divine Love and Grace is extended to *all* people, including those customarily considered outcasts or outsiders. So, why does he give this Canaanite woman such a hard time? Her request is humble and sincere. She isn't even asking for herself, but is seeking healing and release for her young daughter. It's the kind of request we would expect Jesus to respond to with immediate and compassionate action; but instead, he initially ignores the woman, and then insults her. The key question is, "Why?"

Many biblical scholars - like today's political spin-doctors - shrewdly suggest that Jesus responds in this manner to "teach a lesson" to his disciples, and to the woman. By disregarding her request, Jesus might get his disciples to stick-up for her, which isn't something they normally would do. Often, they try to jealously keep Jesus for themselves; or they'd get upset when he'd pay attention to women or children, Samaritans or other "outsiders." At least this time, they acknowledge the Canaanite woman's presence, and encourage Jesus to do something. His response, however, is extremely jarring.

Jesus says to his disciples, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." [Well that's pretty blunt!] On hearing this, the

woman kneels before Jesus, and once again pleads her case: “Lord, help me!” But he answers her, “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” [Well that’s just plain brutal!] This image of Jesus ignoring a woman seeking help for her tormented child, and then implying that she’s some kind of groveling mangy *dog* - is definitely disturbing. This is precisely why many biblical scholars attempt to clean-up this encounter, by claiming that Jesus *really* intends to help her - but first he toys with her emotions, so he can teach his disciples a lesson in inclusivity, and teach her a lesson in the importance of persistence.

Personally, I find that explanation far more disturbing than the possibility that Jesus is simply responding from the ingrained cultural and racial prejudices of the society in which he was raised. I think what we actually have here, is a marvelous example of how Jesus is both fully human, and ultimately Divine! Like every person of any race or culture, Jesus grows-up hearing that there are people of other races and cultures who are ethnically and ethically, morally and mentally inferior to themselves. These socially ingrained prejudices are an unfortunate part of every human society - Jesus’ and our own. Fortunately though, as Jesus reveals, we don’t have to hold-on to these learned biases. Once we recognize them, we can immediately and unequivocally renounce them; and take-hold of the Divine Truth that *all people* are equally welcomed and embraced by the Holy One’s abundant Love.

In this morning's Reading, Jesus is basically having a bad day - a bad day which is transformed into a remarkably *good* day, because of this woman's faithful persistence, *and* because of Jesus' own willingness to learn and grow and evolve. If we take this encounter at face value - without trying to explain-away Jesus' initial response - we are presented not one, but two exceptional models of faithful and courageous living. First, there's Jesus, who is willing to be challenged and changed. One who is secure enough in his own self and in his own relationship with the Holy One, that he can immediately change direction when he sees a better way to go. One who shows us that a mature and genuine *faith* includes the ability to adapt and expand our thinking.

Then there's the Canaanite woman, who demonstrates that true faithfulness includes a willingness to challenge others - to confront racism, sexism, bigotry, or bad behavior wherever it arises! It's as if this woman believes that Jesus is capable of more than even he himself thinks he is at that particular moment. And her unshakable trust in the abundance of Divine Compassion and Power, even makes Jesus marvel, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

Now, as people raised with our own racial and cultural biases - as individuals who've no doubt had a few bad days of our own, you and I can be greatly encouraged by Jesus' - and the woman's - examples. We, too, can acknowledge our mistakes; learn from them; and take the appropriate corrective action. A rigid, crystalized Christ really can't help us with this; but a learning, adaptable Jesus can help *us* learn how to acknowledge and overcome our mistakes and prejudices, and to move forward as compassionate and caring children of our One Divine Source.

The Canaanite woman's mission to help her daughter, ends up helping Jesus remember his true mission - of embracing and

loving *all* people in the Name and Power of the Holy One.  
Likewise, her courageous example can help inspire and energize you and me, as we seek to carry forward our church's Stated Mission of "Loving, Serving and Accepting *All* People with God's Life-Changing Power". In today's political and social climate, it is crucial that you and I increase our commitment and our efforts to extend Divine Love and Grace to *all* people - regardless of race, religion, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, or social standing;  
That we speak-up and act-out on behalf of those who are put-down and pushed-aside by religion or society;  
That we faithfully proclaim the tremendous depth of Christ's love for us all - a love that is willing to learn and grow and expand - making sure that there is room at the Table for *everyone!*