Matthew 15: 21-28

I find the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman one of the most painful in Scripture. This year, I also find it one of the most timely. First, the pain: Jesus treats her, well, horribly. When she begs him for mercy for the sake of her tormented daughter, he ignores her, remaining silent in the face of her pleas. He then seems to give in to the pressure of his disciples urging him to send her away. When she refuses to be ignored and pleads her case once more, he insults her by calling her a dog. It all feels, quite frankly, rather awful and not at all like the Jesus we expect.

Now, I know the traditional interpretation: Jesus isn’t really being mean to her, he’s just testing her by constructing barriers to see if she’ll overcome them. And then, when she passes her test, he gives her an “A” by healing her daughter. Truthfully, as you may guess, I don’t buy it. It runs contrary to pretty much any other story of Jesus in the Gospels. Rather, I think Jesus has a pretty specific focus for his mission and that focus gets enlarged, broadened, and pretty much broken wide open by the faith and audacity and persistence of this woman.

“Yes, Lord. Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” With this painful, even pitiable, yet faithfully persistent plea, the Canaanite woman asks to be seen and heard, recognized as another child of God. And through her person and her plea, she teaches Jesus something about himself and his mission that is crucial for him to learn. I realize that we may feel uncomfortable with the idea of Jesus “learning,” but I can’t think of another term that better captures Jesus’ expanded sense of mission at this point in the Gospel of Matthew, the gospel that ends with the commission to take the good news to the very ends of the earth. Did he know her heart or was he changed by her?

Another theory by scholars is that he was testing the disciples or proving a hard point to his disciples, by using this stark contrast of breaking tabus of talking to a woman, talking to a caananite, one that is definitely of a “so called” lower class to the people and disciples considered to be a pagan an outcast. It almost seems that the disciples were racists? But then Jesus does something that is shocking after he slanders her, he does a complete one eighty and after calling her a wild dog, after hearing her pleas she says “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.” If you remember that I read the beginning of the verse this week that was an optional text for today because I think that is very poignant to this story. Jesus begins by saying what defiles is not what you eat as in the law, but the words that come out of your mouth; and I wonder if it is no mistake that he says these nasty words to this woman that defile her to prove to the disciples by the end
of the chapter that she is the one who has great faith and where does that leave the disciples who were ready to write her off.

And for that matter where does that leave us who ignore the civil rights violations that are happening blatantly and without the anonymity of hoods, with no shame and remorse on our very own soil. Defiling God’s people. (video)

Why does this matter and why is it so timely: It’s way, way too easy for us to assume that God is on our side, looks like us, favors our positions, and endorses our views. Call it sinful, call it human, but let’s be honest: it’s really, really easy for us to imagine God is just like us. On one level, that ability to imagine God is like us is absolutely crucial. It is, in a sense, the whole point of the Incarnation—that God became one of us—and therefore allows us to imagine being in relationship with God. The problem is when we imagine God is only like us—as in, not like others.

And just as the Canaanite woman teaches Jesus, or that Jesus proves to the disciples and us through his change of heart toward this woman, that God’s mission and vision and compassion and mercy are bigger than what he may have initially imagined, so also might the Canaanite woman teach us the same at a time when synagogues are threatened, mosques are being fire-bombed, and neo-Nazis and white supremacists march armed in the streets: every time you draw a line between who’s in and who’s out, you will find the God made manifest in Jesus on the other side.

But honestly: I think we probably already know this. That is, I don’t think that you really think Jesus is only like us. And I think it’s also unlikely that you believe Jesus looks just like us and isn’t also concerned about those who look different. So what do we do?

I honestly don’t know. But I do know that simply knowing that God loves all people is not enough, not when groups march to assert their superiority over other races and ethnicities and too often claim that God backs their views.

I also know that as important as the law is in telling us what we ought to do, it fails to create in us the ability to do it. Which is why we also need to proclaim the Gospel clearly and compellingly, the Gospel that in Jesus’ cross and resurrection we discover that God’s love is, in fact, for all. That, God is working in us and with us and through us to make this world a more just and equitable place; that God will grant us courage and grace sufficient to meet the challenges of the day; and that when we stand with and for those who suffer or are persecuted, we encounter God
in a powerful and tangible way. Because the amazing thing about the Gospel is that, unlike instruction or good advice, it creates in us the ability to do what God would have us do and be the persons God calls us to be.

So I open up this passage reminding us of the vital, challenging, and ultimately life-giving truth that God loves all people and bids us stand against those who deny human rights and dignity to anyone. Perhaps it’s a prayer on behalf of those who suffer the effects of racism and against those who inflict injustice and bigotry. Perhaps it’s a prayer of repentance and for courage to overcome any feelings of white privilege that we may hold. Perhaps it’s an invitation to prayer for another faith community or race.

What I do know is that knowing what is right without speaking it in some way is not enough. As I said before “Faith without action is just showing up.”

The Canaanite woman’s first plea was met with silence. Imagine what would have happened if she had turned away, discouraged, fearful, or defeated. Would Jesus have sensed God’s larger mission? Would he have said that the forgiveness he offers through the gift of his body and blood is “for all” or just “for some”? Would he have imagined that God loved and sent him to save the whole world, or just part of it. We don’t know. We do know, however, that this woman did not retreat to silence but spoke out, offering a testimony that rings down through the ages: “See me! See me as a person, not as a woman or a Canaanite or a minority or a foreigner or someone from a different religion or as a burden. See me as a person and child of God.” And he did. The question before us, is whether we will.

After all we call ourselves followers of the one who went to the cross because of the evil and injustice in the world, so we need to take a stand and confront evil, no longer afraid to rock the boat or offend our neighbor. Jesus needs people who will boldly witness to their faith. To stand our ground like the Canaanite woman and take on evil and injustice. So remember these words on the big screen those words that were used to defile God’s precious children. I invite you to take a chalk on your way out of church and on the sidewalk of the church or your own sidewalk or on the streets of downtown- or on facebook, let’s take action let’s make a small difference and write a message for all to see that Christ would intend. Let’s be persistent and courageous like the caanite woman who stands up for justice and human rights. Here are some examples of words of truth and faith, be creative, share the Good news these words that are healing and life giving as opposed to divisive and hateful. Let’s take our faith into action, let’s take a stand as the church against hatred and violence and offer Christ’s love. Great is your faith. amen