

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – August 20 (Proper 15)

This week you officially have Biblical permission to preach a crummy sermon. Of course you will have to be handing out the same crumbs that Jesus does to the Canaanite woman, but they were crumbs in the metaphor they were using.

Actually you also have something of a biblical permission to preach a scandalous sermon as well. Scandalous?! We don't usually see faith that way, but that seems to be the message for Matthew's first readers and for the preacher of this day. After watching Peter reach into the basket for the bread two weeks ago, and last week get out of the boat to walk on water, this week Jesus invites all of us out of the boat of our own securities and traditions. He starts talking about some radical inclusiveness here.

This leads us to the truth that there is a scandalous feature to faith. God's love is even given to "them." The preacher might simply begin by identifying them. For the religious types at Matthew's time, it seems to have been the Canaanites, those ancient enemies of old whose barbarous worship practices had so enticed their forefathers that they went "whoring" after the Baals and the Asherahs. In the case of the ancient Canaanites, to call this whoring was not just metaphorical. Baal was the rain and storm God, another version of Zeus, but in Canaan, whose food supply was utterly dependent upon the arrival of late summer rains, this took a strange twist. The Canaanites seemed to believe that it rained when Baal and Asherah copulated. When it was dry, the question became how to get god in the mood. This was crudely accomplished through temple prostitution, a peep show for the gods. The whole thing gave ancient Canaanite worship a pornographic sense, what one of my students once referred to as a certain "Hugh Hefner vibe." Of course, you can imagine this always appealed to the more juvenile-minded members of the society who were no less common than they are today. This also meant that ancient Canaanites apparently did not share our struggle for involvement by the men in the congregation. I can only imagine that the same crew who gathers to watch *The Simpsons* twice a day in Portland would be pretty much into Baal worship. Of course, the Portlanders who assemble either to watch or participate in the world's largest naked bicycle parade might also be there. This crowd is probably also present in your city, no matter where it is.

You can also then understand the disgust with which the ancient Israelite prophets viewed this religion. By the way, this seems to have degenerated into this as Israel's history progressed. We don't know much about early Canaanite worship, but we do know that before the temple was built many Israelites worshiped on the high places which had been dedicated to Baal and did so with approval. In fact, Solomon's famous dream in which God gave him wisdom took place at Gibeah, a major Baal worship site. At first it seems that there was a legitimate ability for Israelites to worship at these places, but later it came to be seen as impossible for a good follower of YHWH to be found there. We sometimes forget that Moses is as far from Isaiah as a medieval Christian is from us. A lot can happen in 500 years to change things.

The confusion about Baal and YHWH is probably because in the Canaanite language the word Baal simply means “Lord.” The Israelites who initially gathered at these high places did so to worship “the LORD” (YHWH) and probably used the term “Baal” as the locals did. We also see a little of this in the Torah where Moses is careful to instruct the priests that they always had to wear a robe that went down to the ground lest they expose themselves. This would have been an unlikely rule to make unless someone was doing otherwise. This would suggest that he foresaw that they would be offering sacrifices in places where the sexually charged Baal worship was also happening.

Harry Wendt, the author of the Crossways Bible Study, once suggested that before the Exile 90% of Israelites worshiped Baal 90% of the time. After the exile, however, those numbers dropped dramatically. He estimates that only 10% of the people worshiped Baal 10% of the time. (He arrives at these numbers by analyzing the number of Baal figurines found in pre-exilic Israelite homes and post-exilic Israelite homes.) The Exile worked, it purged the people of Israel from their idolatrous ways. By the time of Jesus and Matthew the Jews of the Roman Empire were noted as monotheists and radical monotheists at that. The Romans thought they were a little crazy in this. Not only did they dedicate themselves to one god, but they even went so far as to suggest that there were no other gods. To the Roman this just looked foolish because it seemed to put all your eggs in one basket. What if you were wrong?

When Jesus encounters the Canaanite woman in Matthew today, he is encountering not just a Canaanite but a “hated Canaanite.” The readers of Matthew’s Gospel would have known her through the lens of that great struggle conducted by the OT prophets like Hosea and Elijah and Elisha. She was the reason they went into exile, she was the temptress who had seduced their forefathers away from the true faith. Joshua had been told to kill them all, but failed and that caused untold grief for the Jewish people. She was simply the worst of the worst in their eyes, a daughter of Jezebel. It is worth noting that when Mark tells this story to his largely gentile audience, he simply calls her a Syro-Phoenician woman, locates her geographically. Matthew calls her a Canaanite. It is the same place and no reason to doubt that this is the same woman in both accounts, but the historical name Canaanite is absolutely loaded for the Jewish reader. (Your congregation may also be interested to know that these people were also the ancient Phoenicians who set up a trading empire in the first millennium BC. Their reach extended all the way to North Africa where they established Carthage. Hannibal and his elephants crossing the Alps were a Canaanite army. Hannibal’s father, Barca, prepared for the eventual invasion of Italy by founding a forward base of operations in modern day Spain, the Punic/Canaanite word for such a base was “Iona.” Hence we have Barcelona today.)

This woman and Jesus’ treatment of her is a scandal. Jesus praises her faith, calling it great. He does not treat her as the disciples imagine he should, in fact he gives her praise that he gives to no Jew. None of the disciples are praised for their great faith in Matthew. Only one other person

is praised this way in this Gospel and that is a Roman Centurion (Matthew 8) which would have had much the same effect.

For the reader of the time, God's blessing given through faith to these two paragons of evil would have been scandalous.

Who is the scandalous object of God's love today? Is it the naked bicycle parade types? Is it the Moslem? Is it the man or woman who has torn your congregation to pieces by their loveless and mean spirited behavior and words? Is there anyone whom you find outside the realm of God's ability to love? Yes, there are people who are going to Hell. I do not mean by this that all are saved, but as C. S. Lewis once said, the doors to Hell are locked on the inside first. God has always knocked on that door and pleaded for the inhabitants to turn around (repent) and come out. It is only in the face of stubborn rejection that God locks those doors from the outside. Hell is not a sign that God does not love some people. He loves them all and is grieved by their stubborn rejection of Him.

Who is on the other side of the door? Or perhaps we should ask whether I am on the other side of the door to someone else? Is there someone who hates me so? Does the homosexual hear the word conservative Christian and lump us all into the same homophobic pigeon hole? Does the Moslem see the scantily clad women of Madison Avenue and in his reaction lose sight of the fact that there are members of this society who also are uncomfortable with the way we portray women?

I find it interesting that there was once a day when Israelites did worship at the Baal sites but gradually that came to be corrupted. What was once permissible was eventually considered evil. It crept up on them. I think this means we constantly have to be aware that the realities which obtained in our grandfather's day may not always obtain for us. Some things never change, Jesus is the same, but the preaching of Christ does in fact change as each generation changes. My grandfather, after all, once firmly believed that life insurance was an evil lack of trust in God and a profiting from death. Where would we be without Thrivent today? Was my grandfather right?

### **Collect**

Almighty and everlasting Father, You give your children many blessings even though we are undeserving. In every trial and temptation grant us steadfast confidence in Your loving-kindness and mercy; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*God gives blessings we don't deserve. The Christian can never forget the merciful and gracious aspect of their relationship with God. It has been said that there are really only two religions in the world. Christianity which is based upon this gracious relationship in which God saves us despite us and then the rest of them which are all built upon some sort of a buy and sell economy. Part of the struggle for us as preachers is that many who walk under the banner of "Christian" are really using the vocabulary of the buy/sell relationship. I have often heard*

*Christians say what amounts to God saves me because of who I am. Sometimes they credit their faith, other times they credit their good works, and other times they credit simply their good intentions, despite their failures. I think in many of these folks a living and saving relationship with God is established by the Spirit, but it is simply poorly expressed. Yet it also has to be admitted that if one takes their words at face value what they are really confessing is an attempt to buy the favor of God. True Christianity says that God's favor is not for sale, but he gives it away, a true gift.*

*Luther used to talk about "despite" theology and contrast it with "ergo" theology. Ergo theology said that God loves me because (ergo) I did something right, at Luther's time this meant penance, a pilgrimage, an indulgence, etc. Despite theology the opposite. God loves me despite what I have done, not because of what I have done. God loves me despite who I am, not because of who I am. Ergo theology is essentially another form of idolatry, it simply worships the worshipper. God loves me because I have done something right. Even faith can be seen as the thing I have gotten right and the hell-bound "other" has mistaken. But if faith is something I do and that distinguishes me from someone else, then I have done something right and he or she has not. I wonder if most contemporary music composers have really understood this. So what I have come to Jesus!? So what I praise him, honor him, and worship him? Does that really make a difference? Can we sing perhaps about him coming to us? Is my praise rooted in his great deed for me or is it simply the object of my warped and sinful human attention which is perpetually curved in upon itself (in se curvatus)?*

*For the Christian this results in a singular posture before God and everyone else: Thankfulness. This is born of a humility which does not assume that I deserve any good thing from God, but it does receive the good things from God. There is another way to assume that my deeds matter so much. As I have said before, I really think we sometimes deny the goodness of God with our overplayed penitential humility. We can play the humility card so much that we start to doubt that God would actually give us anything. "I am a worm" may be true, but it is not the end of the story. If we let it be the end of the story, we are fundamentally denying the good things that God has done. One can express a merit relationship with God in the negative as well as in the positive. God does not bless me because I am so terrible is the same Law logic as God blesses me because I am so good.*

*So the petition is not that we remember we are worms but rather that we remain confident. God does love us despite ourselves and that love is meaningful in times of trial and temptation. I am at the same time a sinner and a saint. I can with confidence say that I am indeed perfect. God has made me so. I am a saint. Mother Theresa had nothing over me. I have the very righteousness of God, the same righteousness that she had by virtue of her baptism and which we both will see on that last day when she and I stand before the judgment seat of God. I have that right-ness, that perfection. In my relationship with God, I am perfect. To say otherwise would be to deny God's work in my life, and that would be like getting a gift and never using it, never*

*enjoying it. Now, to say it always raises the “but he’s a sinner!” objection from the folks who know me well, but it then gives me an occasion to speak not of my deeds which are indeed problematic, but of God’s deeds in his Son. I can make the scandalous claim because Jesus has scandalously loved me.*

*Even this seemingly logical result of God’s great love requires his help. Yes, I am helpless even to be the helpless recipient of God’s love. My human nature will always try to claim the gift as mine by right or, if God’s Word succeeds in beating the self-righteousness out of me, my human nature will then assume that it could not be and God doesn’t truly love me. So, I pray for help. I need help in this regard, we all do.*

### **Readings**

*Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 The editors of the pericope system have a number of criteria for choosing passages. One of them is that the reading needs to be appropriate for a public reading in the presence of the whole assembly. The Bible sometimes deals with subjects which are not appropriate for children and for public worship. I think this is why verses 2-5 were omitted. The inclusion of eunuchs might have raised a few questions in the pews which parents did not want to deal with yet. You might consider your own congregation and, if you deem it appropriate, include these verses.*

Thus says the LORD:

“Keep justice, and do righteousness,  
for soon my salvation will come,  
and my righteousness be revealed.

<sup>2</sup> *Blessed is the man who does this,  
and the son of man who holds it fast,  
who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it,  
and keeps his hand from doing any evil.”*

<sup>3</sup> *Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say,*

*“The LORD will surely separate me from his people”;  
and let not the eunuch say,  
“Behold, I am a dry tree.”*

<sup>4</sup> *For thus says the LORD:*

*“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,  
who choose the things that please me  
and hold fast my covenant,*

<sup>5</sup> *I will give in my house and within my walls  
a monument and a name  
better than sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name  
that shall not be cut off.*

<sup>6</sup>“And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,  
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,  
and to be his servants,  
everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it,  
and holds fast my covenant—  
<sup>7</sup>these I will bring to my holy mountain,  
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;  
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices  
will be accepted on my altar;  
for my house shall be called a house of prayer  
for all peoples.”  
<sup>8</sup>The Lord GOD,  
who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares,  
“I will gather yet others to him  
besides those already gathered.”

*This passage seems to be fairly easy to parse, and it is. God’s love is not limited to the people of Israel, he will gather other folks to himself. Being those very foreigners to the Israelites of which he speaks, we get this point. But now, as the people of God, we are just as tempted as they are to think that the love of God is somehow limited to the club of which we are a member. It can be just as difficult for us to remember that God’s love is extended to all, even those with whom we have a problem.*

*The choice of people here is important. The eunuchs in the ancient world were the officials who served as the civil service. Being a eunuch meant that you were not a threat to a king or emperor. Because a king needed to be physically whole, you could not yourself ascend to the throne, nor could your children, for obvious reasons, pose a threat to the princes of the realm. Emasculated, your talents as a diplomat, planner, ruler, etc. could be justly rewarded by the king without the political calculation which often accompanies this.*

*We know from several of the books of the period that the Jewish exiles had found their way into the bureaucracy of the Babylonian and Persian empires which made extensive use of eunuchs. Daniel and his three companions were advisors and later governors. Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king. Esther of course was served exclusively by women and eunuchs. It seems that some of these eunuchs came to worship the God of these exiled Jewish captives.*

*But the faith of the Jews was all tied up with the promised seed of Adam and Eve, the descendent/child of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the son of David who would redeem the world. For the Jewish people this always involved being tied to this line genealogically. Of course for the poor eunuch this was a problem. He could have no children and was thus out of the loop, permanently.*

*The foreigner could be included, as was Ruth and Rahab, but they too faced serious social stigma and an increasing bigotry on the part of the Jews which by the time of Jesus had only gotten worse. At the end of Acts Paul is arrested because the local Jewish population in Jerusalem riots. The riot is caused by a rumor that he has brought gentiles into the temple.*

*Isaiah seems to be focusing upon the impossible cases, the people who simply cannot be “inside” and declaring them to be the objects of God’s love. For the preacher, what I think this does, it gives us a bit of a license in regard to this text. The outcast, the person whom we deem to be “outside” can be there for a number of reasons, some of them moral, some of them for other reasons. The eunuch was physically outside. The foreigner was simply born to the wrong people, the child of the wrong man and woman. Too often we have thought of these matters only in terms of morality. Are there other ways to define “outside.” Does poverty put some people outside. How about hygiene? My brother taught in a public school in the Midwest and his faculty were about to report a family for child abuse because this little boy had not bathed for two weeks. 100 years ago, however, that would not have been strange at all. Queen Elizabeth I supposedly only bathed quarterly. What standards of acceptable do we use to know that some are outside while others are in? Will we see within a few years that those who don’t use some technology are considered backward and almost “retarded?” Will we view them with pity or contempt? If I don’t have a smart phone, will I soon join the ranks of the Amish, Hutterites, and others as the object of a National Geographic article about a strange culture in our midst?*

*Our culture has increasingly been noting those who have been victimized by the powerful. Women who have been sexually abused often feel that they are so “unclean” they simply don’t belong. They have no “purity.” The guy who struggles with pornography, the woman who has had an abortion and is so ashamed she cannot tell anyone, may well be feeling like those foreigners in this passage.*

*Does the man who cannot find a job in this economy really feel like a eunuch? Does he feel like his is powerless to produce? Does that change what he thinks he is, does it make him of no worth? What does God say to him?*

*This ascription of “excluded status” may well be self-imposed. We likely have a more than a few folks sitting in our own pews who are asking the foreigner question here. “While I may have deceived these people in Church with me, I cannot really be a member of this body. If they only knew who I really was, would they have elected me an elder or let me teach Sundays School. Would they let me be their pastor? If they only knew.” The horror of this sort of logic is that when you pursue it, God really does know and if the preacher and the Spirit are not there with the Gospel at hand, it will lead to a crushing despair.*

*Do we have something to learn from AA in this regard? Do we come to church afraid that people will really know who we are? The Alcoholic who can stand up in a community of peers and bare his soul and his failings knows that the folks around him won’t judge him for it, but they will support him in his struggle against his addiction. Have we come to see the church as a*

*fellowship of saints and not a collection, even a fellowship of sinners? Jesus collected sinners and got in trouble for it. Have our congregations become places where we might be afraid that we alone in this congregation have sinned?*

*If you are drawn to this text, and it is a good one, I would recommend using the middle section and combining it with Acts 8:26ff, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. They start at chapter 53 and it says that “starting there” Philip taught him about the Christ and what He would do. I can only imagine that when they had progressed only a couple of chapters to 56 that was the moment that the chariot was ordered stopped and the two men got out to descend to the waters of baptism beside that road. Philip’s congregation of one that day in the chariot was both a foreigner and a eunuch.*

Psalm 67

May God be gracious to us and bless us  
and make his face to shine upon us, Selah

<sup>2</sup> that your way may be known on earth,  
your saving power among all nations.

<sup>3</sup> Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you!

<sup>4</sup> Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,  
for you judge the peoples with equity  
and guide the nations upon earth. Selah

<sup>5</sup> Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you!

<sup>6</sup> The earth has yielded its increase;  
God, our God, shall bless us.

<sup>7</sup> God shall bless us;  
let all the ends of the earth fear him!

*With hymns like this in their song-book, you really have to wonder how it is that the Jews of Jesus day could be so dismissive of the gentiles. But that they could sing one thing and act another way should not surprise us. Our songs often focus on the love of God, yet the reputation of Christianity in the larger community is one of judgmental hypocrisy.*

Romans 11:1-2a, 13-15, 28-32 *I have included the intervening verses. I think this time they took them out because it raises so many of the Jew/Gentile questions which are alien to our people’s lives, but which might be good for the preacher to read considering the topic of the Gospel/OT lessons.*

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. <sup>2</sup> God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. *Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel?* <sup>3</sup> *“Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.”* <sup>4</sup> *But what is God's reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”* <sup>5</sup> *So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.* <sup>6</sup> *But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.*

<sup>7</sup> *What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened,* <sup>8</sup> *as it is written,*

*“God gave them a spirit of stupor,  
eyes that would not see  
and ears that would not hear,  
down to this very day.”*

<sup>9</sup> *And David says,*

*“Let their table become a snare and a trap,  
a stumbling block and a retribution for them;  
<sup>10</sup> let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,  
and bend their backs forever.”*

<sup>11</sup> *So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous.* <sup>12</sup> *Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!*

<sup>13</sup> Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry <sup>14</sup> in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. <sup>15</sup> For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? <sup>16</sup> *If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches.*

<sup>17</sup> *But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree,* <sup>18</sup> *do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you.* <sup>19</sup> *Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.”*

<sup>20</sup> *That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear.* <sup>21</sup> *For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you.* <sup>22</sup> *Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.* <sup>23</sup> *And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God*

*has the power to graft them in again. <sup>24</sup> For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.*

*<sup>25</sup> Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. <sup>26</sup> And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,*

*“The Deliverer will come from Zion,  
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”;*

*<sup>27</sup> “and this will be my covenant with them  
when I take away their sins.”*

*<sup>28</sup> As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. <sup>29</sup> For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. <sup>30</sup> For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, <sup>31</sup> so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. <sup>32</sup> For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.*

*There is a lot here and a preacher can fall into several difficulties in this passage. It seems that Paul is trying to make a very important point here. He is subjecting everything to the Gospel. The Jews have rejected it, but the Gospel has come to the gentiles, good news. The Jews might accept it at a future date, the Gospel will be magnified.*

*For the preacher in this context this requires a little sensitivity. Too often I have heard men go off on the role of Israel or Jews in all this. I think that is missing the real point of what Paul is saying here. We need to remember his conclusion to chapter 8 in this. Everything works for the good of those who love Jesus, who are in the relationship of faith with God whereby he bestows forgiveness and rights the broken relationship. That is the Gospel and that Gospel is the operating principal of the whole world now in Paul's eyes.*

*There is a real tension in all this, but remember the preacher loves that. They are enemies on one hand and beloved on the other. (vss 28-32) but this is a tension which applies to us too. We don't belong but we do. We are alive and yet dead, we are eternal and yet we die, etc. This is the stuff of preaching.*

*For this conversation, however, there is a sense that we first have to focus upon what is really important. I remember a discussion we once had at my parish in Roseburg in which we were considering a proposal from our neighbor to swap part of our parking lot for a neighboring lot next door. It was contentious and difficult, only made more so by the fact that the neighbor was “so crooked he screwed his socks on” in the estimation of one man in the congregation. It would have been so easy for us to get into a fight and hurt feelings and break relationships over this. A wise man stood up at just the right time and said, “guys, it's just a parking lot.” In the larger*

*scheme of things, no one was going to heaven or hell because of the decision we were making here. It really was just a parking lot. We elected not to do the trade, by the way.*

*The preacher will want to remember that geopolitics in the Middle East today are not nearly as important in God's eyes as the salvation of people from sin, death, and devil.*

Matthew 15:21-28

<sup>21</sup> And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup> And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." <sup>23</sup> But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." <sup>24</sup> He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." <sup>25</sup> But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." <sup>26</sup> And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." <sup>27</sup> She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." <sup>28</sup> Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

*This is a strange text to modern ears and the preacher needs to take that into account. I went into some detail about this passage in the opening essay, so I don't want to rehash that here. Jesus at first does not listen to this woman. Then, at the urging of his disciples he addresses her, but consider at what he says! Jesus calls this woman a dog. This is not nice talk here and we have been conditioned to believe that Jesus approves of us using nice words and thus he must speak nicely himself. In this hyper-sensitive age, calling someone a dog is not considered by some to be Christian and here is Christ doing this. This could be "hate speech."*

*What is going on? I believe this text lies at the heart of this whole section of deeds and actions of Jesus. Sandwiched between chapter 13 with its parables of a radically different kingdom from expectation and then followed by Jesus discourse on forgiveness in chapter 18, this is the narrative pillar that ties both of these sections together and gathers together several threads from the surrounding accounts.*

*A look through the earlier context of this passage suggests that there is something also going on with the food image. Remember two weeks ago, Jesus fed the five thousand and there were more left-over pieces than there was food at the beginning? In the chapter which follows this account, Jesus will feed the four thousand with the same result. Is it a coincidence that Jesus is talking here about food with this woman, food and leftover crumbs? Is one of the points of the feeding miracles that there are plenty of leftovers here, enough for the whole world?*

*Shortly before this in Matthew's narrative, Jesus has been in a dispute with the Pharisees about clean and unclean, kosher and Sabbath keeping. It is not what goes into the mouth that makes one unclean, asserts Jesus, but what comes out. Look at what comes out of this woman's mouth. Is it clean or unclean? Jesus calls it great faith.*

*My contention is that the real objects of all this strange behavior by Jesus in this section is not the woman and her daughter; although, surely they would dispute that. I believe, however, that as Matthew presents this the real objects of Jesus actions here are the disciples and his first century readers and of course us. The kingdom's net pulls in all sorts of people. It is a mustard seed sort of place, seed cast far and wide and sometimes that seed bears fruit. Like yeast it does not look like it should work, but God has given up all for treasures hidden where you might least expect them. Jesus, searching for his pearls, has found one of great price and really wants his disciples to see that.*

*And so Jesus does not speak to her. Why not? I cannot psychoanalyze Jesus. But clearly there is something going on here. His silence is not met with reciprocal silence from the woman, but she ratchets things up. Finally the disciples tell Jesus to send her away. They probably mean that he should do what she asks because they are weary of all the wailing. And so Jesus turns his attention to her. She might have wished that he remained silent because he essentially calls her a dog. It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. I came for the lost sheep of Israel.*

*At this point all the Jewish types, including the disciples, are nodding in agreement. This is the logic of their world. God has a chosen people, and while there can be righteous gentiles, this woman is clearly not one of them. She is a dog. But Jesus already knows this woman. He has already found this treasure. He is just claiming what his life's blood is about to buy. She responds with this marvelously witty comeback. "Yes, but even the dogs get a crumb."*

*All I want is a crumb, a little piece of bread that has fallen from the master's table. Just a crumb! She has not disappointed Jesus, indeed she has evidenced a faith he has found sorely lacking in his fellow Jews. He smiles at her and gives her what her heart yearns for and gives the disciples an important lesson as he does. Her faith is great. Remember last week when Jesus was walking on the water and Peter started to sink? Do you remember what Jesus said to him? "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"*

*What makes this woman's faith so great and what makes Peter's so little? When we discussed this in the past, we were drawn to the idea that this woman was here praying for her daughter. Armenio was preaching to men in a prison, their mothers, wives, girlfriends, and others are praying for them too. In Latino culture often women are at the bottom of the social pecking order, often the least educated, but this woman knows who Jesus is, knows that Jesus can help her daughter. She has learned the lesson.*

*After all, we admitted that it took some faith for Peter to get out of that boat, perhaps more than I can find if I turn my gaze inward. What makes our faith great and what makes it small? Faith small as a mustard seed can move a mountain. It is God who works through faith and he has all the power that it needs, but still, there is an advantage, a good thing to having a strong faith. What makes it strong? Is it not that the woman holds Jesus to his own words. She listens to what*

he says and “catches” him in his own words. “Yes, I am a dog, I know it, but even the dogs get the crumbs.”

*How shall we catch our Lord in his word? First of all, that means listening very closely to what he says and taking him at that word. But then it means having the boldness and the confidence to hold him to it. It means kneeling at that rail and holding up that wafer and saying to God – “You promised! You promised that when I eat this my sins are forgiven. You promised that when I eat this you come to me and make me one with you and all your people. You promised to dwell in my life and make it more like your life. You promised!” God loves it when we hold him to his promises. Faith means walking out the doors of our church and believing him when he says he goes with us and works through us for the salvation of our neighbor and our friends and our family. And so that means opening our mouth and giving God a few words to work with inside those relationships.*

*Faith means that when Jesus said he died for all the sins, he meant all of them, even the ones that really hurt me, even the ones that really shame me. Faith means listening and acting on what you hear. For the disciples faith meant treating the Canaanites differently. They were no longer an enemy. Christ had died for them – see Paul’s eloquent discourse on this in Ephesians 2. Salvation by grace through faith without works means that the dividing wall of hostility is broken down. Jesus himself is our peace. For Matthew’s audience, persecuted by their Jewish neighbors and family, it meant that they might believe Jesus and find their community among the gentiles who worshiped the same God and ate ham sandwiches at their church potlucks.*

*We mentioned earlier, after the Isaiah text, the women who had been sexually abused. What are these women calling themselves? What words do they use, if they even articulate their shame? Did you hear Taylor Swift’s testimony in the trial of the fellow who groped her? Her language was shocking, but it was also brutally honest. It might be a very timely sort of topic.*

*The man who has no job, and there are lots of those, what words are there to describe them? Unemployed – is there a positive thing we can say? We try, but what does one say to this? What about the chronically unemployed?*

*What hurts are there in minority cultures? Are they lying so deep under the surface that we cannot actually even articulate. Are there people in our audience who have a shame which is their “name” which they are afraid to speak? Jesus calls the woman a dog, she does not deny it, but she gets the “crumb” she needs.*

*So what is the Law and Gospel to our congregations? His disciples seem to think that their Jewishness makes them somehow more acceptable to God. Jesus constructs this whole scenario for their benefit. He draws out of this woman these words because he would demonstrate to them the truth of what he had been saying to the Scribes and Pharisees in the section of Matthew immediately prior to this. The Gospel for these disciples is that Jesus teaches them. Is that really the Gospel for our people as well, as we sit in our churches and imagine that God somehow*

*loves us more than the homeless guy standing at the top of the exit ramp with a cardboard sign or the woman down the street who is a serial polygamist on her fifth husband, or...this list could go on.*

## **Law**

1. We really are dogs, worms and the rest of the metaphorical language we dredge up from the basement to describe sinners. It is true of us. We indeed can make no claim on the goodness of God. He is always within his rights to punish and destroy us.
2. There is nothing we can do about this. Physically and spiritually deformed by sin, we can no more stand upright in the presence of God than a quadriplegic man can stand upright. We are in the clutches of sin. The woman's daughter is helpless before the demon which possesses her. The disciples are equally ensnared in the bigotry of their culture and past.
3. As Christians, our old man loves to set up a boundary which would explain why we are inside the kingdom and why the other guy is outside that same kingdom. We want to find that boundary inside ourselves and thereby establish some merit within us. It is perverse and a fundamental misunderstanding of the Gospel and we all have it. As a result we often look down at those outside the Church and even those inside the church who are not of an approved denomination.
4. Blinded by sin, we often hear the right words from God and completely misunderstand them. The Pharisees were terribly right about the kosher laws, but they simply lost sight of the fact that there were larger truths in play here. God's love for people trumps our rules and our traditions and even mean that sometimes the letter of the rules he sets forth in Scripture need to be read in that light.
5. We often accuse ourselves and wonder if God can really love someone like myself. Am I really one of the outcasts?

## **Gospel**

1. God has said to us that we are his precious children and he loves us dearly. He has established that in the cross and that means the whole world is different for us.
2. Our helplessness is not a boundary any more. God has bridged every chasm that separates us. In Christ he has become fully human that he might redeem the fullness of humanity. He has taken all our infirmities to himself that we might run once more in his kingdom.
3. God has made amazing promises to us. Faith listens attentively to those promises and acts upon them. His promised forgiveness, presence, and help mean we approach everything in this life very differently. Every sinner is now an opportunity to speak a word of

forgiveness. Every problem is a chance for God to come with a solution. Every hunger is a chance for God to feed us. We take God at his word.

4. God opens our eyes. The disciples did not see the full implications of Jesus's words and ministry, but in the story of the Canaanite woman he opened their eyes. Likewise he also opens our eyes to see this town and community differently. He opens our eyes to our own shortcomings, but more important he opens us to see his great word at work in our lives.
5. Yes, God has opened our eyes to see our own failings, but he has also given us a new set of eyes to see ourselves as the treasures for whom he died.

### **Metaphors of the Gospel**

There are some very preachable metaphors in this passage and the preacher may want to just develop one or two of them, but I would not recommend all of them, at least not all in one sermon. That is too much metaphorical freight for one ear to hear in one sermon.

The Physical Metaphor – we are deformed – this from the Isaiah text but also the daughter of the Canaanite woman and the Canaanite herself who is deformed by her lineage.

The Food Metaphor – we are hungry and Jesus feeds us – This builds on the feeding miracles, but involves the woman and the crumbs.

The Society Metaphor – Inside/outside – we are outside but Christ brings us into the favor of God. The woman is as far away from the kingdom as possible but Jesus not only heals her daughter but also awakens the disciples to see the woman differently.

The Clean/Unclean metaphor – Similar to the society metaphor.

### **Sermon Ideas:**

1. Counting on God (Gospel – That the Holy Spirit would make us confident, even bold in our relationship with God.)

God is the ultimate Tetris player. He flips us around and finds us the perfect spot in his kingdom, gives us a name that is everlasting. He can even find room in there for a Canaanite woman with a demoniac daughter (she probably deserved it! Demoniacs always begin as willing participants in the evil in which they find themselves. Was she that “Goth” girl who lives down the street, wears black all the time and has multiple tattoos and piercings?)

Of course we might wonder if there is a spot for us in this kingdom of God, really. After all, we perhaps have fooled the preacher, even our own family, but deep inside we know what is in there and we don't like it. God knows it too and we are very afraid of that truth. But we can be sure of this. There is no sin in that blackened heart of mine which is bigger

and tougher than the shed blood of Christ. That blood and that Savior take sinners and do amazing things, including you and your sins.

But this has a rather scandalous implication for us. We, like this woman, can trap Jesus in his own promises. He actually invites and likes us to do that. He wants us to hold him to the promises which he made in this supper which we eat here. He promises to forgive our sins, strengthen us and encourage us. You can take that to the bank and cash it. Be bold with that promise.

And when we leave this place, we also are bold. Confident in the loving-kindness of God and his great mercy for sinners, we are bold to go forth from these doors into the world to which God has called us and made us witnesses. Our fears and our enemy tempts us to silence, but God has already lovingly accepted us and mercifully worked with our words in the past. Our relationship with God is not hanging on our success as witnesses and his success as a gatherer of people is not hanging on the eloquence of our words. He can work with some pretty strange stuff. Remember, he makes odd shaped stones into his corner stone and builds us into a temple for His Spirit. We are bold witnesses because we count on his promises.

We are also emboldened to be risk takers in other ways. We are no longer afraid to lose. We have the ultimate safety net under us. Christians are bold and courageous because we are confident in the love of Christ. Nothing that happens in my life can change the fact of the cross and the love of God which he has expressed therein. I can love the unlovable neighbor, I can try to mediate the impossible fight, I can forgive the unforgivable sin.

This text makes us bold even with God. Like the woman who was seemingly rebuffed, we can speak honestly and hold him to his word. He has made amazing promises to us and loves it when we hold him to them. He invites us to be bold with him in this regard. God loves it when we catch him in his own promises. Hold that wafer aloft and say, “God, You promised!” Walk into that tough situation and pray, “God, You promised to be with me here. I am counting on you!” Talk to the guy you hate and remember that Jesus prayed for the guys who hated him from the cross and enjoined us to do the same. He is smiling to see you join him in loving despite the antipathy. Count on him.

This text may also help us speak to the women in the congregation – Jesus heals the daughter. He values her. We can count on the promises of God this way too. He has numbered the hairs of our head and notices when even a sparrow falls to the ground. He promises to love you.

2. God’s Scandalous Love! (Gospel: That the Love of God would overwhelm the prejudices and fears which close our mouths and isolate us from our fellow human beings.)

This sermon makes a basic assumption. We are all bigots of a sort. We may not fall into the classic mold of a racial bigot who hates a whole segment of humanity, but we all have

our prejudices and bigotries, usually born of our fears. The law development will need to ask carefully what those fears and those hatreds are. Are we a country club sort of congregation that only lets in the “right sort” of people? How is it that our town is 25% Hispanic but we have not a single Latino in our midst? Where are the “others” in our ministry? It may not be quite as obvious as one might think. The greatest passions are often reserved for the folks who are the closest to us.

But the general thrust of the sermon is not a scold about who we are, but a witness to who Christ is. He loves them all, every one of us and them. His blood was human blood, shed one drop at a time on the cross of Calvary. Everyone whose blood runs red through their veins shares in that humanity for which he has died, no matter what we think of them. In fact, so real is that blood of Jesus that it changes our thinking of them.

This is what Jesus had in mind with the Canaanite woman, and I would simply tell that account in this sermon. It is gripping and well done by Matthew. My students in my classes love this story. The application of this should not be difficult, in fact, sometimes it is almost better not to make it too clear, your folks are pretty good at applying these sorts of things to their lives. What you do want to do is really portray Jesus as the great lover of sinners, all of them, even to the point that he uses this woman to teach this lesson to his disciples. I think they will get the point that we might just be as hard to love as the folks whom we think are hard to love – the disciples thought they were inside and hence lovable, but it is the Canaanite woman who comes off looking better in this story.

This sermon is best preached to the congregation which has the first sermon down. If you don't have sermon idea 1 in place, this sermon will be difficult.

3. What a friend we have in Jesus (OT – build on the line in the familiar hymn – we have a privilege to carry things to God in prayer – not a right, but a privilege.)

This sermon is a sermon on prayer. The woman in the text today prays. Indeed we might learn a great deal from her prayer and use her as a guide for our own prayer. Luther once said he wished he could pray like his dog watched him eat sausage. We learn from this “dog” of a Canaanite.

What do we notice from her prayers?

- A. Her prayers have a specific target audience. Generic prayers uttered to “God” or simply the “Higher Power” of AA are not what we are talking about here. She prays to Jesus, the Son of David, the heir of her people's ancient enemy.
- B. She is passionate about what she is praying about. Her prayers are born of her deep love for her suffering daughter.
- C. She needs Jesus' response. We need God's help in so many ways, but we don't look for it and hence our prayers are often languid affairs which don't really give evidence

of an expectation that God would even answer or do anything. She looks for help from Jesus.

- D. She is persistent, even in the face of what appears to be a divine rebuff.
- E. She listens as well as speaks. When Jesus first turns her away, she has heard what he said and responds.
- F. Her listening is humble. She does not get upset when he calls her a dog, but accepts his label and turns his own words back into a prayer again. Even the dogs get a few crumbs. Just give me a crumb.
- G. Her prayer is precious to Jesus – it looks like he is not listening, but indeed, he is hearing every word she says. His silence is about someone else, it is about the disciples and the blindness of their hearts. God’s apparent silence or his “no” to us may not be about us at all. Keep praying.
- H. Jesus answers her prayer. The daughter is made well. The demon is exorcised.

Prayer is always the action of faith or it is not really prayer. Prayer is what faith does, and since faith is that relationship with God which He has established through the Spirit and his Son, we need to talk about prayer in the context of that relationship. Jesus praises her great faith. The preacher will have to exercise caution here. Prayer is not a formula or a mechanism; although, there are good and healthy practices which help us pray. Prayer must be first rooted in that gracious gift of God. His promise is always to have a father’s ear tuned to our voice.

- 4. That he might have mercy on all (Epistle – That the Holy Spirit would open the eyes, hearts, and minds of the hearers to receive God’s mission for the Church and act on it.)

Paul had a really ugly problem on his hands. His own people had rejected him and his message. They had rejected him on a number of occasions, slandered him, and even gone so far as to try him, beat him, stone him, and otherwise attempt to kill him. Eventually they would succeed as the case which resulted in his final arrest and execution was brought by Jewish mob in Jerusalem.

Amazingly, Paul never seems to have animus or bear a grudge, even against the people who directly do this. I think here the story of Paul and Sosthenes could be retold or perhaps told the first time for your parish. On Paul’s second missionary journey, he spent considerable time in Corinth. You can read this story in Acts 18. While there the Jewish Synagogue rejected him. Some went with him, including the Synagogue ruler to a nearby worship site. (This undoubtedly angered some!) The synagogue chose a new leader, Sosthenes, and he immediately set out to pursue an aggressive course of action against Paul. They tried to do to him what the Jews of Jerusalem had done to Jesus. They charged him with inciting civil unrest with the Romans. But the governor, Gallio, was not like

Pilate. He threw the case out of court. The members of the Synagogue turned on Sosthenes at this point and beat him up. The governor shook his head and watched all this but did nothing to stop them.

Luke ends the story right there, but I don't think it ended right there. I picture in my mind's eye that Sosthenes was lying on the ground, beaten, bloody, dirty when a shadow fell on him and he looked up. There kneeling above him, offering a hand to help him was none other than Paul himself. Even though Sosthenes had just tried to have the Romans kill him. I imagine Paul taking him home, cleaning him up, tending his bruised and battered body. And making a friend.

Why do I say that? Look at the first words of Paul's letter to the Corinthians. It was written at the beginning of the third missionary journey when terrible things were going on in the Corinthian congregation, fighting, incest, lawsuits, and more. The letter is written by Paul and Sosthenes. The man who tried to kill him was now composing letters with him. Was he the leader of the group of folks from Cloe's house? I think so, but perhaps he had become a traveling companion of Paul on the whole journey. I suppose it could be another Sosthenes, but why does Luke tell the story, and Paul write the letter if they are different folks?

Paul has no real enemies, even the guys who are trying to kill him, they are not the enemies. In Romans he articulates his love for those who oppose him. But that was not just a nice sentiment, it was an active life which Paul lived out.

God has given us that same faith in Christ. Now, go and do likewise. Embrace the enemy, love him, as Jesus has commanded us to do. But know that this is all rooted in the kingdom of God which Jesus worked on the cross for us and gave us in our baptism. Love with his love, count on his power to change things, trust his kingdom to come and his will be done.

5. A Lesson Learned (Gospel and OT – that the Spirit of God, his Love, would open the hearts, minds, and lives of the hearers to the strangers in our midst)

We talk of strangers here, but sometimes those are not people whom we don't "know" but might be folks who are sitting in church with us today.

This sermon will start with the Gospel reading but really speak it as a lesson given to the disciples. They had been wondering why there were all the way up in Tyre and Sidon, They had called the people they saw along the roads, "dogs." Jesus is not speaking what he really thinks of this woman in this exchange, he is repeating the words of his disciples back to them, after they ask him to heal her. He is taking their comfortable attitudes to an uncomfortable extreme to show them just how far afield they are. They have had the very Gospel walking with them, and they would have kept Him for themselves and their own families, their tribe.

Jesus, however, has come for the whole world. He is about to demonstrate to them that he is calling people to faith from every tribe, and nation, and people (see Rev 5).

The law here is that they needed it. We need it too. Like them, we have been immersed in God's word, but sometimes we have been very slow to learn and see what Jesus had in mind for us in Matthew 28 when he sent his church out to make disciples of all nations. But eventually Jesus does get through to them. In fact Isaiah had been speaking of this inclusion 800 years before Jesus was born. But they did not get it and sometimes we have a hard time with this too.

In Acts 8 we read of one of those early disciples of Jesus, Philip, a Deacon, who was part of that first band of Christians in Jerusalem. Cast out by persecution he found himself on the road to Gaza. Prompted by the Spirit he ran up along beside a chariot with an Ethiopian Eunuch reading from the book of Isaiah. He was at Isaiah 53, and Acts tells us that beginning with this very verse he started to tell the man the good news.

About three chapters later they came to the OT text we have today. (I would include the omitted verses.) Here was a foreigner and a Eunuch who was suddenly aware that God was including him. The Eunuchs were no longer a dry tree, without hope and without any connection to the kingdom to come because they had no children. They were given a name which would not die. The foreigners were to be brought to the temple of God to rejoice.

God taught those disciples a lesson that day, a lesson we see played out in the pages of Scripture itself. But also a lesson which we learn today.

Examples: The church has a welcoming problem today, let's just face it. We sometimes have told the homosexual and the Muslim that they don't belong here. But that is simply buying into the narrative of the day. Doesn't Jesus play by another rule-book in which he welcomes all? Sometimes we have done better. Churches are often the only places that the mentally ill find any welcome. The homeless would be in pretty tough shape without the generosity and care of Christians in this country. Look into your congregational ministry here. There may be much more going on that you imagine. Point to the evidence that God has taught this lesson to these disciples. Even thick headed Germans can learn something from Jesus.

We can still learn more, and we are never done growing into the heart of Jesus. His heart is very large and it has room for everyone, even the folks we find difficult. But he is always teaching his church this lesson. He is here today teaching us today.

There are crumbs enough for everyone! He is bringing all sorts of people to his holy mountain, more than those he has already gathered. Paul prays for the conversion of the very Jews who will accuse him and eventually see him executed by the emperor. God is always teaching this lesson to his people, we are always learning.

Perhaps we need to see the love of God extending to the people outside our doors.  
Perhaps after a recent voters meeting we need to remember that love extends to everyone  
inside these doors.