



Proper 15, The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning's gospel text paints a stark picture of the difference between insiders and outsiders. Few things in life are more painful than feeling like an outsider. I'm reminded of a funny scene from the television show *The Simpsons*.

Click here to view the scene: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OwHGE7uhjco>

We can probably all sympathize with Homer to some extent. It hurts to be rejected by others and it is this kind of rejection that the Canaanite woman experiences in today's gospel story. She is entirely an outsider to Jesus and his fellow Israelites – she is a Gentile from Canaan, or in Mark's version of this story, she is a Syro-Phoenician. That is to say, she is part of the ethnic and religious group that had lived in Palestine since before the Israelites lived there and she is part of the group that is traditionally described in the Hebrew scriptures as the enemies of Israel.

When Jesus says that healing the woman's daughter would be like giving Israel's food to the dogs, he is referencing the conventional Israelite attitude towards Canaanites and Phoenicians – that they are as much outsiders to Israel as dogs are to human beings. But is that actually Jesus' opinion of the woman? If Jesus actually considered her outside of God's grace given to Israel then he would have sent her on her way. Instead, he engages her and ultimately grants her request.

In fact, if Jesus actually considered her to be outside of God's grace to Israel, he wouldn't have been in her neighborhood to begin with. Remember, Matthew tells us that Jesus had come to where she lived – Jesus had left Israel and come to Phoenicia, to the district of Tyre and Sidon, to preach the good news of God's love for humanity to the very people that Israel considered to be their enemies. If Jesus really bought into the racism of his fellow Israelites, why would he have come there to share God's love with the Canaanites?

In this context it's interesting to note how the producers of the Matthew movie, which we just viewed, depict this scene. (Click here to view the scene: <https://youtu.be/cVTnjp4-PPk?t=231>) Did you notice that Jesus shushes Peter when Peter suggests that they send the woman away? It's as though Jesus is saying "hold on, Peter, there's more going on here than you're aware of." Jesus' body language and facial expressions as he interacts with the woman suggest that he is waiting for something, that he is expecting a certain response from her in response to his expression of stereotypical Israelite attitudes – and Jesus is not disappointed.

The producers of the video seem to recognize that Jesus would not even have been in Tyre and Sidon to begin with if he actually thought the people there to be dogs in comparison to the Israelites. I believe the producers of the movie are correct in their interpretation of Jesus' words – he is expressing the stereotypical, racist language of the Israelite people of his day in order to set up a teaching moment for his disciples. Jesus is setting up a dramatic encounter in which he voices what Israelites like his disciples believe and the woman proves them wrong – the woman proves that even the Canaanites whom the Israelites look down upon have faith, are reaching out for God, and are included in God's gracious love for all of humanity.

There's also a connection here to our text from Romans. The passage that Lee read from Romans is the end of a rather lengthy section of the book, spanning chapters 9 through 11, in which Paul wrestles with the question of why it is that some people accept Jesus and some reject him. In essence, Paul reaches a conclusion that mirrors Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman. Paul realizes that, like the disciples, we love to put people into the categories of insider and outsider, saved and lost, loved and hated by God – but Paul has concluded that all such distinctions are ultimately artificial barriers of our own construction. What does Paul, say? "God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all."

In other words, Paul is saying, it's all a set up – this is all God's dramatic way of revealing to us that our prejudices are unfounded and that everyone is included in God's life. As Jesus set up the dramatic encounter with the woman by quoting Israelite opinion of the Canaanites, so also God has set up a dramatic encounter between believers and non-believers – he has "imprisoned all in disobedience" to use Paul' language – and for what purpose? "So that he may be merciful to all," Paul says.

The point of both our Gospel story and our Romans text is this: there are no insiders and outsiders with God; we are all insiders, all included in God's love, and all adopted into the Triune Life through Christ. We

may not always see it, we may at times have our vision clouded by our own prejudices and by our own disobedience to God's call to love others, but our blindness doesn't change what's real and true.

May we all, like the Canaanite woman, have the courage to claim our place as insiders in God's life and may we all, like St. Paul, have the conviction to believe that God's mercy extends to all of humanity.

Amen.