

The Canaanite Woman

Homily at St. John of God Church, San Francisco

by

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On October 31st, 1999, Egypt Air Flight 990 crashed into the Atlantic Ocean about 60 miles south of Nantucket Island. All 221 people aboard perished. Andrea Gouze, a Jewish rabbi, was called to go and care for the families of those who lost their lives. Most of the families were Muslim. At first, she was confused as to what to do in the midst of all that grief, and among people so different from **her** and often antagonistic towards people of her own background. But all at once, she found herself holding a sobbing Muslim woman who had just returned from seeing the debris field with its scattered dead bodies. She and the woman did not share a common language, and so they could not speak to each other. They simply held each other, and wept. Andrea writes that cultural and religious differences are not barriers at a time like this. She says, *“Everyone cries in the same language.”* I wonder if the desperate Canaanite woman was crying as she was pleading to Jesus to cure her daughter of a demon. Our Gospel this morning is about acceptance and non-acceptance, the drawing of lines around people and groups of people, lines that can be called barriers, as to who is and who is **not** included. The ones left out have the feeling they don’t quite fit in or belong, exiled to the outside looking in.

The Canaanite woman knew perfectly well that she was excluded. But in her quest to find healing for her daughter, she was willing to cross **every** social boundary, including men and women by rushing up and speaking to a man alone in public; including Gentile and Jew, as a sworn enemy considered spiritually lost and morally unclean, begging help from a Jewish healer; and including petitioner and master/teacher by taking Jesus’ words and turning it back on himself. Many would have seen her as having a shady past since some personal sin **must** have caused the demonic possession in her family. Now some scholars have been turned off by Jesus’s seemingly derogatory behavior towards the woman, especially his use of a racial slur, *dog*, to refer to her Canaanite nationality. They contend Jesus really did view his ministry as encompassing only Israelites and the woman is challenging his cultural bias to expand his focus to comprise Gentiles. Most other commentators, and I include myself in this group, contend that this text gives us an example of Jesus’ wit and irony. He is playing satirically with the woman, almost tongue in cheek, because it’s impossible to believe that one whose whole ministry is dedicated to the outcasts and disenfranchised could intend such mean-spirited words. And remember just a few chapters prior, Jesus had cured the Gentile centurion’s servant of paralysis. He smiles as he says, “Now, you know God only cares about Jews,” and she smiles as she volleys back, catching on, “But your bread is so precious, I’ll be happy to eat the crumbs.” I think Jesus decided to demonstrate to the disciples who wanted to get rid of the woman, the absurdity of

their prejudice by assuming that position himself. He's also giving the woman an opportunity to elicit her profound declaration of faith. Mahatma Gandhi in his autobiography tells how, during his student days, he read the Gospels and saw in the teachings of Jesus the answer to the major problem facing the people of India, the caste system. Seriously considering embracing the Christian faith, Gandhi attended church one Sunday morning intending to talk to the minister about his idea. On entering the church, however, the usher refused to give him a seat and told him to go and worship with his **own** people. Gandhi left the church and never returned. "If Christians have caste differences also," he wrote, "I might as well remain a Hindu." It took courage on the part of the woman to take on the all-Jewish, all-male company of Jesus and his disciples. Hers is not a passive, accepting faith but a pro-active pushy persistent faith that doesn't give up, like those PUSH bracelets people wear: Pray Until Something Happens! When Jesus first ignored her and then seemingly demeaned her people, she did not get angry or lose her cool, but remained energetic, clever, and hopeful in her faith. To quote a slogan of the civil rights movement, she kept her eye on the prize, which was to show while the Israelites have primacy at God's table, as a Gentile, she **also** has a place at the table and is entitled to God's blessing in Jesus. She was not afraid to challenge prejudice and falsity even in religious high places, with her tenacity and vision. Based on her faith in a God who can change events for the better, the woman was not content to be ignored, convinced that because of love, her daughter deserved to be given a chance at living a normal productive life. She will do **whatever** it takes to cure her daughter with her persistent single-mindedness and creative ability to find a **just** way to bring about the good through her empathy with the pain and suffering of others. At the bottom of the heap, **nobody** cared what happened to her or her daughter, so she has neither **nothing** to offer or to lose, as her dignity and pride are gone. She would do what was necessary to encounter Jesus, even when there seemed to be insurmountable obstacles, crossing **all** barriers to stake her claim on the mercy and generosity of God for **all** people, trusting him to give her what she needed. She embodies the sentiment of Tibet's Dalai Lama when he says, "the more we are motivated by love, the more fearless and freer our actions will be." She is provoking Jesus and the disciples to go beyond exclusion and to act out of their deeply held values of loving-kindness and care for the foreigner. She calls **us** to set aside our fears and to speak truth to power.

If the disciples represent us, the church, then the church depicted in this passage consists of those people on the inside who try to protect Jesus from being bothered by people on the outside. Yet Matthew is critiquing this model of the church, as it is Jesus who crosses over into Gentile territory and disregards boundaries. In Jesus, God dissolves all identifying barriers; there are no more insiders or outsiders; no **them**, only **us**. There are **no** boundaries to God's compassion. God is **always** pushing our limits! We should measure our goodness, not by what we resist or exclude, but by what we embrace and **include**. God draws

no lines at all, nor does God respect the lines **we've** drawn. God draws an all inclusive ever expanding circle meant to invite **more** people in, where **no** one is left out, since **all** people are of equal value and in need of God's mercy. If that were not the case, **we** might risk finding **ourselves** on the outside. It isn't the place of **any** Christian to send **any** one away. God has rescued people we long since have given up on and think are beyond salvation. God has chosen many we know **don't** deserve to be there, including us. We should be fully occupied with gratitude at our **own** salvation. As the late gay black Chaplain to Harvard University Peter Gomes wrote, "If the gospel is truly good news, it has to be good news for everyone, for it is either an inclusive gospel or **no** gospel at all." We are to cast off our triumphalistic attitudes about who possesses the **real** truth and realize that God calls who God wills. We must never be so arrogant or ignorant as to suggest that **we** are the only and exclusive means by which God is at work healing and redeeming **all** people on earth. René Schäfer was a Dutch prisoner of war in Japan during World War 2. His captors had sentenced him to forced labor in a shipyard in an isolated city. Through years of harsh captivity, Schäfer had learned to hate his guards with a white-hot passion. He used to pray to God every night that the Americans would attack the city and destroy it, exacting revenge for his years of suffering. In August 1945, Schäfer's prayer was answered. Hearing an air-raid siren one day, he dove into a ditch. A moment later, he heard the noise, saw the flash -- and felt the heat -- of the world's first nuclear weapon used at Hiroshima. In the darkness and confusion that followed, Schäfer was amazed to find himself helping not only his fellow POWs who had been burned or blinded, but also his guards. "From the moment the bomb went off, you see, there was no hate left, it was turned to pity. There was **even** no difference for me between the Japanese victims and my friends. I felt myself a victim among other victims, not a Dutchman among Japanese. The bomb had killed all hate." Again, it is our common language of **tears** that bind us together, as "we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny," to quote Martin Luther King. Grace always disturbs us when it breaks through the barriers that protect us from people we fear and distrust. When God's grace kicks down those walls, we find ourselves shocked! Doesn't God have **any** standards? The message of our Gospel is that the ones we most dislike, look down upon, or consider expendable, are often Jesus in Jesus' most distressing disguise! Can we speak and live the good news in a way that the people God sends to us have a chance to hear the invitation? Can our circles widen so we can welcome strangers and the marginalized, to offer them God's enticing love and acceptance, as we discover through them that the reign of God has personally and **unexpectedly** intruded upon us? As mercy is poured out on **all** of us, Christians and non-Christians, let it be our prayer that Jesus may say to each one of us, as we embrace the outsider, **great** is **your** faith...let it be done for **you** as you wish!