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**“Where Are the Canaanite Women Today?”**

**Text: Matthew 15:21-28**

**August 20, 2017**

I doubt that it will surprise you to know that I take Jesus pretty seriously. When the Gospels tell us Jesus says one thing or another, I tend to back him up. We all try to go along with what Jesus says and does. I think that is a great policy. That obvious point being made, we turn to the Gospel text for this morning where I have to admit, and I think Jesus blew it. A Canaanite woman, which means she was not Jewish, not part of Jesus' community of faith, not in his orbit, asked that her daughter be healed. Jesus said it was not right to give the children's bread to dogs. She replied that even dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table. Jesus then agreed to heal the little girl. People who do a better job of sticking with Jesus than I do say he was inviting her to reflect on her larger relationship with God and not just her immediate concern for the child; that he knew all along that he was going to do the healing. Maybe, but I tend to agree with Helen Reddy, “That ain't no way to treat a lady.”

Whether Jesus was broadening the Canaanite woman's perspective or just having a bad day is not the real point. What is important is the gap that existed between them and the difficulty they had bridging it. Does the fact Jesus did not identify with the Canaanite woman constitute a limit to his obligations to her? Put another way, does the Kingdom of God have boundaries? Are some people objects of our concern and others not? It is a big question that is tormenting every level of our world: Christianity and Islam, legal and illegal immigrants, the political buzz about American Exceptionalism, the continuing horrific racism, individual charitable giving, and national foreign aid all must deal with the kind of gaps between people that we can see between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. I would like to talk with you about where the gap comes from and how our faith deals with it.

If we were asked if there are limits to God's compassion, love, and expectations, we know instinctively the answer is NO. God is not limited, there are no boundaries in the Kingdom of God. God is Creator of All, Lord of All, Father of All, Judge of All, and Savior of All. We know instinctively that is the right answer. However that is not the only instinct we have. There is

another instinct that is more practical and more applicable to our daily lives. We are basically tribal. We know that we need boundaries and limits for ourselves. What is more, we like them. We like the clarity that comes from knowing where we stand. We want to know that we are in something, that we belong to something. That results in an essentially tribal instinct in our religious as well as secular life, an instinct that creates gaps like the one in the Gospel. In order to know we are in there must be someone who is out. We understand the theory that God loves everybody but we cannot imagine that God loves everybody equally. Didn't Jesus say there are children and there are dogs? We know children and dogs are not loved in the same way and that we are not bound or obligated to them in the same way. There are differences in people and we need to know that we are on the upside of different. That need for clarity gets translated into our theology, making it essentially tribal in nature.

Many churches honestly believe that if your name is not recorded in their books then it is not in God's books either. Christianity is full of people who maintain that if you don't know Jesus the way I know Jesus, then you don't know Jesus at all. If you don't love God the way I love God, then God doesn't love you at all. If you don't think the way I think about (fill in the blank here)—abortion, sexual orientation, the Bible, the end of the world, the beginning of life, world hunger, a particular war, or religious clothing—then God doesn't want you on the team. The only thing fundamentalist Muslims and fundamentalist Christians have in common is their certainty that God has no use for the other side.

It feels good to know the focus and the limits of our compassion. It feels so good that it makes claims of such certainty very attractive. People flock to them, undisturbed by the contradictory judgments such certainties render on each other or the spiritual arrogance that underlies them. Yet in spite of our tribal instincts—or maybe because of them—the Canaanite woman will not go away. She stands before us as she stood before Jesus, across the gap of religious tribalism, wondering if we will reach across it, daring us to reach across.

We all want clarity and certainty in our lives, yet life remains unclear and uncertain. We want clarity and certainty in our faith, yet faith remains tied to our doubts with a bond we cannot break. We want to know that we are getting it right, doing it right, and our tribalism gives us that affirmation. If someone else is doing it differently they must be wrong. Correct? They must be

outside of God's chosen, the "we-got-it-right and we-belong circle." Our ethics, responsibilities, and compassion do not need to stretch to include them. Our only obligation is to convert them from their wrong-ness to our right-ness. We cannot do that until we point out how wrong they are. Right? So the process begins with judging others. It has to.

The wisdom of the Canaanite woman was that she did not address the essential disconnect that Jesus held up to her. She ignored the gap between Jews and gentiles, children and dogs. Instead she asserted their essential connectedness: even if it is crumbs from the table it is shared hunger and shared food; even if we are separated by great difference we are bound by common humanity; even if we do not like each other we can still love a sick child. The Canaanite woman stands outside, just beyond the reach of our obligations, just past the edge of our righteousness, but the very fact of her is a tangible challenge to tribal religion and tribal ethics.

Who is the Canaanite woman for you and me? The homeless man who walks back and forth at intersections? The inept clerk, the rude waiter, the silent neighbor with the noisy leaf blower? The powerless who have nothing to offer? The clueless who clutter the conversation? The pointless who insist on being taken seriously? The graceless whose specialty is embarrassment? The addict who drains everyone around them? The zealot who won't be quiet about gun control or conspiracy theories or entitlements? The do-gooder who espouses everything from apologizing for world history to equal rights for those we see as unequal? For our country the Canaanite woman might be those who suffer in countries with little or no resources; we seem to have a hard time of noticing them. Or is she those who are just plain wrong about life, about how to live it, or what is important in it? Or the ones we just cannot figure out, who literally or figuratively do not speak our language. Some are as far away as a news clip, some as close as the dinner table. But they are there aren't they? The Canaanites, the others, the odd ones out; the ones we would ignore...if we could.

My friends, there are gaps in this world, no question about that. Many of them are made by us because we need them to sustain our sense of identity, security, and dignity. Our tribal instincts create gaps between those who belong and those who do not, us and them, in and out, right and wrong, good and bad, children and dogs. They define us nationally, politically, racially, theologically, socially, and economically. But God, who never seems to leave things well enough

alone, maintains a universality that refuses to bend to our need for identity, security, or even dignity. So God keeps interrupting our tribal ceremonies with Canaanite women who ignore our disconnectedness and assert our uncomfortable commonality.

How does God go about helping us bridge the gaps of life, connecting with the disconnected? How do we Christians deal with those Canaanite women who push up against our identity and security, who challenge our tribalism and ask for our bread? It works this way.

The Spirit whispers questions about them and us. Whispers that we must really listen, which is why so few hear. The Spirit whispers questions like: What is this situation truly about? What should be done about it? ‘What is our connection?’ because most of our instincts will be shouting that we are not connected, not to them, to him, to her—but we are. ‘What should be done?’ because faith is not something we think or feel, it is the action we take and not always the thing we want to do but rather the thing we must do. What are we so afraid of? Most of us want the right answers to life’s situations, but God’s choice is to give us the right questions instead.

How are we connected? What should be done? The answer to the first may be as abstract as we are loved by God and share this moment, or as tangible as neighbor, colleague, and community. The answer to the second may be as simple as common courtesy or as complicated as truth. However, the right answers about life only come from asking the right questions about life. That is why God always begins working with us by giving us larger and better questions.

That is what happened in today’s Gospel. It began with obvious differences being questioned which enabled them to move to their connectedness and finally resulted in doing the right thing. That is the path God wants us to take with the Canaanite women in our lives. Thanks be to God! Amen.