

- In our Gospel this morning, we hear the story about Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman. (It is beautifully portrayed in an Egyptian Arabic manuscript image, which I have included in your worship bulletin). It is easy to overlook a critical aspect of this story ~ the fact that Jesus *chooses* to travel to *Gentile* territory. There, he is confronted by *a woman who for two reasons was an outsider*: she was a *Gentile*, and, her daughter had a *demon*.
- By overlooking Jesus' choice, it then becomes easy to mishear a vital aspect of our Gospel reading. It's *Jesus' willingness to be playful* –even *dangerously playful*– as *he enlarges our* concept of *God's Kingdom*. Some contemporary commentators don't recognize this about Jesus' journey *into a foreign region*. For *they view it as a story about how a gentile woman enlarges Jesus' concept of the Kingdom*. This follows from the way modern theologians stress the *humanity* of Jesus over his *divinity*. In other words, *'how he was like us' comes to overshadow 'how he was different from us.'*
- This is especially true in our understanding of *intellect*. We associate 'intelligence' with skills like computing numbers and remembering information. Yet, the key to our Gospel story may lie in something *different*, in what is called "*emotional intelligence*." Emotional intelligence is *relational*, and involves feelings, character and temperament. It depends on *maturity*, and relies on *insight* about what *enhances or hinders* well-functioning community. *When we overlook these fuller dimensions of ourselves*, we *limit* our concept of *what it means to be human*.
- Think, for example, about *humor*. We assume humor depends on being *witty*, and making fun of people and situations. We forget that *we also deal with serious things through humor*. Humor approaches life *indirectly*, from *the side*, instead of *straight-on*. In medieval times, Christians actually debated *whether Jesus ever laughed!* We know he *wept*,¹ but Scripture

never records him as *laughing*. Surely, we have gotten beyond this narrow assumption, that Jesus never laughed, nor used irony and humor.

- And so, various factors shape how we hear our Gospel story. As I have noted, some interpreters say that the gentile woman opens *Jesus' eyes* concerning his vocation as the Messiah! *This is astonishing*, and I think it's wrong. *Why?* Because of *two important considerations*, internal to the Gospels, and central to Christian doctrine.
- *First*, the Church's basic Christian doctrine teaches that, though Jesus shared many of our limitations, he was never mistaken about his vocation. He could have stubbed his toe in the dark, and may not have known about Antarctica or Algebra. But *Jesus was never mistaken about his messianic vocation*. In other words, he didn't need a Canaanite woman to open his eyes concerning his call to bring Gentiles into the Kingdom.
- *Second*, though we have Gospel stories Jesus where speaks *bluntly* to people, he talks this way to those who are set against the Kingdom. His bluntness leads some interpreters to suppose that –*despite himself*– Jesus is *rude* to this woman! *But this cannot be*. She finds him, and bows down at his feet. She shows him her faith and her openness to the Kingdom. Just as a gentile centurion does on another occasion, bringing Jesus' joy.² We miss the point, *then*, if we assume Jesus was *rude* to this woman, and that she *enlarged his worldview*. For the Gospels show us that Jesus knew what was in people's hearts and minds, and his ability accurately to read a person's character.³ In addition to his expansive awareness of God's Kingdom, Jesus had a profoundly well-developed emotional intelligence.
- *A nuanced reading of our Gospel* will discern some *further details*: notice that Jesus intentionally travels into gentile territory, where he need not have gone. *There*, he encounters a Canaanite woman's faith, and her willingness

to risk showing it. Jesus *also* perceives her openness to God's power, and her remarkable character. They both know how *she –like him– also crosses important social boundaries by approaching him*. He perceives that he can be playful with her, especially given *their mutual awareness of what's at stake*, for –as Mark says– *he could not escape notice* in this gentile territory.

- *Apparently*, it was common then for Jews to *denigrate* Gentiles, by referring to them as '*dogs*.' Religious Jews of Jesus' time were no better at remembering the breadth of *Isaiah's cosmic vision than we are*. It was just as easy for them to forget *God's Covenant promise to Abraham, to draw all peoples into his joyful Kingdom*.
- *Therefore*, in going to the region of Tyre, and especially when encountering this woman, *Jesus takes a huge risk*. Yet, I'm convinced it's one he took *knowing his mission*, and that he could speak frankly to this woman. *With a twinkle in his eye*, he says, in effect, "*Friend, we are on the same page. Both of us know that your people are called 'dogs' by my people. We both know how my people avoid our vocation, which is to share God's Kingdom widely and generously.*" Instead, they excuse themselves by asking, '*why should we give food meant for children to the dogs?*'" Jesus is therefore *not surprised* when, *without missing a beat*, this woman responds *just as playfully*, and just as *seriously*, by saying, "*Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.*"
- Well, *we are also Gentiles* who have been brought in as guests to the *Kingdom banquet*. So we can also be called '*dogs*,' dogs who 'eat the children's crumbs under the table'. *This awareness should caution us ~ it should temper our temptation to rely upon privilege, entitlement, and social preference* to distinguish ourselves from others in the church ~ and from people in the world around us. *God's Kingdom is much bigger than that!* James makes a similar point in our Epistle reading this morning.

- The second episode in our Gospel reading takes us *a step further*. Once again, getting hung-up on *literal* details will distract us from *deeper* truths. *On the surface*, we hear about a man healed from deafness and his inability to speak. Yet, Mark has more profound reasons for sharing this story, than to comfort people with hearing impairment. And so, *this Gospel, about a healing of hearing, is also about being healed to hear the Gospel*. Like many before us, even though *our* ears may function well, *we may still not hear the Good News*. And when we don't *hear* the Gospel, we neglect to *share* it with others.
- But, we know *this* ~ *our ears have been opened to hear the Gospel*. Are we now *ready* to have *our* tongues unleashed? Are we ready to share the good news with our neighbors, colleagues and friends?
- Here is some *Good News that we can share*:
 1. at Grace, *we make an effort to greet every visitor and newcomer equally*, being sensitive to James' wisdom in his letter.
 2. *we are actively committed to living the Word, not just hearing or speaking the Word*.⁴ We host IHN three to four times, every year. We try to share the love of Jesus with people who are living at the economic margins of our society, *simply out of love*.
 3. *we welcome newcomers to the faith. We invite people into the broader Catholic tradition*, with its liturgy and sacraments. *We invite people to grow with us*, into a fuller experience of our Christian faith.
 4. *we have committed ourselves to being a model for the renewal of The Episcopal Church*, and a context for the renewal of the wider Church.
- These four points represent *our core values*. They lead us *forward, on a path of love* ~ where *'we show forth our praise, not only with our lips, but in our*

lives. In the process, we give ourselves up to God's service, by walking before God in holiness and righteousness all our days, through Jesus Christ our Lord.¹⁵ *Thanks be to God!*



Ilyas Basim Khuri Bazzi Rabib, *Jesus and the Canaanite Woman* (Egyptian, 1684)

Mark 7:24-37

Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now [the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin](#). She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. [He said to her, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”](#) But she answered him, [“Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.”](#) Then he said to her, [“For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.”](#) So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. [They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech](#); and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. [Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.”](#) [And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released](#), and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, [“He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.”](#)

Notes:

¹ See John 11:35, in context. Also see, for example, Luke 19:41.

² See Matthew 8:10, in context, and its parallel in Luke 7:1ff.

³ This point is made especially strongly by the Gospel of John; see John 2:24-25, as well as the Nicodemus and Samaritan woman narratives in John 3 & 4. See also Matthew 12:25; Matthew 22:18; Mark 2:8; Luke 6:8; Luke 11:17.

⁴ As James also advises us in another passage; see James 1:22-25.

⁵ A paraphrase of words from *The General Thanksgiving*, BCP:101.