

*Almighty God, Source of all, Living Word, Holy Spirit:
may your Word only be spoken, and Your voice only be heard. Amen.*

God is love, it says in our Scriptures. God is love, we teach our children. Where is love in this story? The disciples try to get rid of this poor woman, Jesus at first denies her request, in effect saying she was not his problem. Problem was, this woman was a foreigner – not a “chosen people.” Mark, who told this story first, refers to her as a Syro-Phoenician Greek – clearly, a Gentile. But Matthew goes further, using the archaic term “Canaanite,” to flag for his readers the Canaan of the Old Testament, the promised land, whose residents were off-limits to the people of Israel – people they were to conquer, not mix with.

Canaan was that land on the east coast of the Mediterranean that encompasses what we now know of as Lebanon, southern Syria, Palestine west of the Jordan. Sound familiar? A land where the relationship of Jew to Gentile continues to seethe and simmer, and often boil over.

This woman first approaches Jesus – very bold, for a woman of her time and place. She shouts; she uses his Messianic titles – “Lord, Son of David!” That’s code for: “I know who you are! I know the power you have! I know you can help me!”

She persists when he ignores her, undaunted by his disciples’ dismissal. She throws herself into the dirt, kneeling, crying, “Lord, help me!” She too is very focused on her mission: getting deliverance for her daughter, beset by demons. Imagine a mother today, watching her beloved girl move from alcohol to drugs in a shame-fueled downward spiral. She refuses to be insulted by his reply, which seems to equate her people with dogs. And she is quick, but polite, to run his reply back on him: “Yes but, even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table. Even the dogs get the leftovers.” She knows that even Jesus’ leftovers are powerful enough to heal her daughter; she’s not asking for a feast; she knows a crumb is enough.

That gets Jesus’ attention – he knows the truth of it. Isn’t he the one who said that a mere mustard seed of real faith can move mountains? Here he is being reminded of that by an outsider, and he can’t deny her faith. This woman refused to be defined by hostility or misfortune or rejection.

In our story from the Hebrew Bible, we have another example of such faith. Joseph, as we heard at the beginning of his story last week, was cruelly mistreated by his brothers and sold to passing slave traders. He ends up in Egypt, where his fortunes rise and fall, and rise again when he becomes Pharaoh's right-hand man, de facto ruler of the country and – when the famine he predicted comes to pass – source of grain for the whole region.

That's how his brothers come to be before him, years later, begging for grain. He strings them along and gets some emotional revenge upon them – but eventually he has mercy and forgives – and even tells them he sees God's hand in the outcome of the evil they intended. If anyone had a reason to be vengeful or angry, it would be Joseph. But his faith allows him to see a bigger picture, one in which God has used him for blessing, even in the foreign land in which he has grown up. Our Canaanite woman showed faith like that, to see the bigger picture. She knew all she needed was a crumb, and her faith in that crumb ensured her a place at the banquet table for all eternity.

We too have been invited to that table, to that feast we partake of in part with our morsels of bread and sips of wine that contain the fullness of God-life. One day we will be sitting at that table with that woman, with Joseph, with Jesus, and with a whole lot of foreigners and outcasts – and they will be our sisters and brothers. We begin that feast in the here and now.

I said a few weeks ago I believe our calling as the Christ Churches is to reach out to people different from us, to form relationships across boundaries of difference. Jesus commanded his followers to go and proclaim the good news to all nations – and yet we so often spend of our time with others who look and think and speak like we do. That's human nature – but it's not what we're called to. Our call is to find and love and worship with people who don't know Jesus yet. That's challenging in a time when we're not even gathering in person, when we don't have events to which to invite people. Except we do. We had quite a few people from beyond our parishes join us for our Racial Justice Book Study in July; we can invite people to join us for worship too, and other groups we do and missions we offer. I've been asked by the president of our Board of Commissioners to help create an Interfaith Commission in Charles County – that will facilitate forging relationships across boundaries of difference. I hope you will participate.

Meeting people is only half the story though – creating relationships is also work. And the only way we can introduce people to Jesus –

the Jesus of the Gospels, not the Jesus of the Church – is in relationship.

That's the pattern we see in the New Testament – people sharing their stories.

They will know we are Christians by our love, and by our stories of hope in Christ.

It is Christ we have to offer, not religion. And we called to make Christ known to all people, even the stranger, the alien, the enemy, the Other.

Our Good News is Jesus himself, God's Love Embodied. Very specific.

And that's how we are to share it – personally, specifically. If that sounds scary,

I'm happy to say there will be some ways we can become better equipped.

This fall, our Diocese is rolling out its new School for Christian Faith and

Leadership, which will offer all kinds of courses to help equip us for deepening and sharing our faith. I'll be leading one on the Sacred Art of Story-Sharing, which will help us become more comfortable claiming, knowing and telling our God-stories – and inviting the stories of others. That's how community is formed. In that space, God can show up and invite people into that holy relationship.

In Connecticut I led an interfaith council and had so many encounters across lines of difference. I once heard a rabbi, a young woman, speak from a Jewish perspective about that time when we know we are at the end of the ages, when Messiah has come. She said tradition has it that one mark of that age will be that “causeless love” will be rampant.

“Causeless love,” love that isn't repaying anything or trying to get something.

It could have been a Christian sermon on God's total, unearned grace –

and I thought, “Wow, I believe we are in that age, and that Messiah has come.”

For me, his name is Jesus, and he demonstrated the most pure, “causeless love”

the world has ever known. In the story we heard today, though,

he first received that love from a stranger, an annoying woman with

tremendous faith, who believed that even his crumbs could heal.

The world will get know who that Messiah is when they see us showing our faith

like that woman did, trusting in the power in even a crumb of the bread of Life; when they see that our faith offers a bigger picture, beyond all the woes that set us back, beyond pandemic and racism and recession – to love.

That's how Jesus will be made known to the world – through us showing love all around us, Love beyond reason or cause. **Amen.**

Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left Gennesaret and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a **Canaanite** woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, **Lord, Son of David**; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "**I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.**" But she came and knelt before him, saying, "**Lord, help me.**" He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "**Yes, Lord**, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, **great is your faith!** Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.