

*21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 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." 23 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." 24 He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." 26 He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." 27 She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." 28 Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.*

I begin with a word this morning: *kratzo*. My Greek-English dictionary says it means to shriek, scream, cry out. When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water toward them, they shrieked, "It is a ghost". When Peter tried to walk on the water and began to sink he screamed, shrieked, cried out, "Lord, save me" and as we heard last week Jesus grasped his hand and brought him safely to the boat.

And now today another shrieks, "Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon."

Who is this shrieking woman? She is a Canaanite – the hated enemy of God's chosen people. These were the people the Lord commanded to be slaughtered as the chosen people came into the Promised Land - enemies for century upon century. But in her desperation this woman is pleading to a Jew: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon."

Certainly she had the words right, calling Jesus Lord, calling him Son of David. And she had the right sort of need – not for herself but for her daughter – a child who was being tormented by the very enemy Jesus came to destroy – a demon.

Yet Matthew tells us that Jesus did not answer her at all.

Have you ever made an urgent request and simply been ignored? This is no message on an answering machine that she left – nor a message that she passed on to Jesus through an intermediary – this is a face to face plea for help – Have mercy on me!

But he did not answer her at all.

So will she give up – go away defeated – turn bitter? No, though Matthew does not say it she must have cried out all the more. For the disciples came and urged Jesus saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.”

When the disciples made a similar request when parents were bring their children Jesus said, “Let the children come to me and do not forbid them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” But these are not Jesus’ words this day. Instead he says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Jesus had a task to carry out, and his task did not include her.

Still, she did not give up. She came and knelt before him saying, “Lord, help me.”

Jesus answered her, “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” Now Jesus is not just ignoring her, he is insulting her – even worse insulting her daughter.

And still she persists – this time quietly – playfully. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s 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.

This is the only time in the gospel according to St. Matthew that anyone wins an argument with Jesus. This is the only time that in this gospel Jesus speaks of someone as having great faith. This woman is special.

She is like Jacob who wrestled all night with that strange visitor and said, “I won’t let go unless you give me a blessing.” She wouldn’t let go.

How we understand this story depends on how we understand God. If God is like a great model railroader directing all the trains, flipping the switches, controlling all, then Jesus knew all along how this story would play out. And your life and mine are about staying on track, God has the itinerary figured out.

Or if Father knows best is our model for God then Jesus is again in charge here, teaching the woman about persistence through his resistance, helping her grow.

But I would like you to consider the idea that Jesus was not acting out a part in this story – that he really did not intend to help her and that she changed him. He thought that Israel was his only concern – she helped him see the whole world. If that is true, this woman changed God.

Now to even think such a thought is against the rules, it breaks the very concept of God to speak of people changing God - let alone an enemy of the chosen people – and a woman, at that. Yet I think this woman did change Jesus.

What sort of a God is this who hears a woman and grants her desire? He is learning the cost of love.

One day that cost will be his life. Yet he will love still - not just holy ones and the chosen ones but outsiders - even enemies.

The world has many today who think God is deaf to the prayers and pleadings of their enemies. But we who follow Jesus know that God has ears for everyone.

And one day as Paul said, there will be no division between Jew and Greek, slave or free, male or female. Indeed, in Jesus Christ that day is already now.