

“For All People?”
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
The First Presbyterian Church of New Canaan, August 20, 2023

Please Read:
Isaiah 56:1, 6-8
Matthew 15:21-28

During the mid-1950s in Bangkok, Thailand, a huge clay statue of the Buddha began to crack due to heat and drought. When some monks arrived to investigate, they shined a flashlight into the largest of the cracks. What they saw surprised everyone. Deep under the gray clay was the gleam of gold.

No one knew that inside this popular but ordinary-looking statue was a solid-gold Buddha. As it turns out, the statue had been covered with plaster and clay six hundred years earlier to protect it from invading armies. Although all the monks who lived in the monastery at that time had been killed in the attack, the golden Buddha, its beauty and value covered over, had survived untouched.¹

Today’s gospel account of Jesus conversation with the Canaanite woman is not only one of the most difficult stories of Jesus to interpret in the New Testament, it’s considered down-right offensive. The Canaanites were notorious enemies of the Jews in the first century. There was a long history of enmity between these ethnic groups, and it was common for them to both avoid one another but also insult one another. You’ll remember the old rabbinic prayer: “Thank God I’m not a Gentile, a woman, or a slave,” which apparently echoed prayers by Plato. Either way, here Jesus, after the woman cries out for compassion and healing for her tormented daughter, refers to her and her people as “dogs.”

Is Jesus having a bad day? Is this one of those rare moments where Jesus, finding himself in the foreign territory of Tyre and Sidon, is just tired of it all and let’s a racial slur slip out? I wonder if we might shine our interpretive flashlight in the cracks of this story and find the gold of the gospel?

Matthew saw Jesus as being the authoritative interpreter of Jewish tradition. He’s the new Moses, and Jesus affirms his rabbinic credentials by saying that he has come “for the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” The question is this: is Jesus, as the child and bearer of traditional teaching, capable of receiving “new wine” as the “new Moses” in his encounter with the “other”?

¹ Tara Brach, *Trusting the Gold: Uncovering Your Natural Goodness* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2021), 2–3, 5.

The tension in the encounter is released with a simple statement of faith. And here is the first real shocker in Matthew's gospel: This Canaanite woman has named Jesus as "Lord" and "Son of David," and when she kneels down before Jesus and declares her utter dependence on God's Grace, Jesus' tradition-shaped heart breaks open. "Woman, great is your faith!" he declares.

The Canaanite woman is the hero of this story, really. She, a woman of the hated Canaanite race and religious heretic, becomes the witness to who Jesus is and the promises of God that go way back to the time of Isaiah. This woman transgresses boundaries imposed by religious tradition, practice, and prejudice, and ironically shows the great faith that Jesus fails to find among his own people.

In fact, this woman is our matron saint. Most of us, if not all of us here are gentiles, outsiders to the first promises of God. But the promises are there, but often ignored by the traditionalists and legalists of Israel. It's an old story really, and we in the church have repeated it over the centuries as well. We love to draw a circle and declare who's in and who's out...

The lectionary juxtaposes this difficult gospel text with one of my favorite texts in the book of the prophet Isaiah. The reminder that God's heart is all about justice and doing what is right is really a desire for all people. Israel is supposed to be the light to the nations, but the vision is global. And I love how Isaiah 56:7 reads, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people."

The context of this Isaiah passage is important: Israel and its temple had been destroyed in 587 BCE, and the people taken into exile in Babylon. Now, many generations later, the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple. The question was, "Are we still God's people? Have decades with the Babylonians re-shaped our identity, values and worldview? Who are we now?"

As they try to re-establish themselves, their very identity is at stake. If, indeed, God allowed them to be conquered because they did not obey the covenant, then now is the time to double-down on following the rules and proving they are truly God's chosen people. So much so, that some voices insist that marriages to foreign wives must be dissolved, and those women sent away (Ezra 10:1-44, Nehemiah 13:23-31). Many argue that true identity could be found only in separating from all things foreign. But Isaiah reminds them that God has a much more global vision.

In this encounter with the Canaanite woman, and in his finally responding to her with his customary compassion and healing power for her daughter, Jesus is

fulfilling God's promise of so many centuries before. The place where God meets people with God's love and compassion is for everyone. Jesus in this encounter with the Canaanite woman gives prophetic witness that God's ways are not our ways, and our traditions are too often more about us than about God. You'll remember that at least in the Latin the word *tradition* is ambiguous: *traditio* meant literally "to hand over" and in the positive sense tradition is handing over from one generation to another what is good, true and beautiful, what is just and right. But the word "tradition" could also mean to "betray," as in handing over someone to their enemy. Tradition can also have this quality, it seems to me, when it simply reinforces bigotry and discrimination.

So, where is the gold of the gospel in all of this? I think first of all sometimes the "other" is the primary agent of God's prophetic Word, and we can never succumb to "Cancel Culture" which would have us dismiss the "other" as hopeless or outside of the scope of God's mercy, compassion and love. This is really hard to say and believe in the current context of our polarized society. OK... Canaanites are not necessarily "New Canaanites," but in our contemporary setting I think it's important to find the courage and energy to seek ways to build bridges across the political and social chasms that divide us... left from right, Republican from Democrat, Conservative from Liberal, White from Black, Local from Foreigner, etc. We are so quick to label the "Other" without seeking to validate their humanity and basic worth in the eyes of God. Seriously, who are the *dogs* in your world?

Wally Badget was a member of our church in Zürich. He was quiet and unassuming, even though he had a house in one of the most wealthy areas overlooking the city. He always had time to serve by doing the most menial tasks and he loved visiting people in the hospital. He kept a low profile, because, well... Wally was gay. He and his partner had been together for 30 some years when I knew them, but of course for many people in the church that didn't matter. Being an international and interdenominational community, many Christians would have written Wally off as a sinner who was going to hell if he didn't repent. He knew. He understood. He was raised in the Midwest and had his share of discrimination and abuse. What amazed me, though, was when we started the ordination of deacons in that church, everyone agreed that Wally was qualified. Wally became the first Deacon of the International Protestant Church of Zürich.

The Canaanite woman, along with the Wally's of our world, continue to call upon God's agents—Israel, Jesus, the Church—to "bring light" and fulfill God's promise to all the nations. It requires of us more listening than talking, more learning than lobbing slurs at our enemies, and a willingness to "repent," which in the Greek

literally means “to change one’s mind.” It requires basic respect for all people, literally “re-spect,” or “look again” to see in the other the beloved child of God that they are, to shine through the cracks of the outer clay of every person’s life to see the gold inside...

I think this is the gold of the gospel for us, for the church today. The best of our tradition has always been there: By grace, we are called to be peacemakers. By grace, we are called to the ministry of reconciliation. By grace, we are called to be a part of God’s healing of the nations. By grace, we are called to create space in our hearts, and space in our community for the “other,” so that we are fulfilling the promise of God that “my house shall be called a house of prayer for *all* people.”

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.