

The Canaanite Woman, or Jesus Changes His Mind
The Rev. Amy Spagna
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Matthew 15:10-28

Way back in the Dark Ages when I taught Latin, one of the very first vocabulary words my students learned was *molestus*, which means “pest” or “annoying.” The adjective was attached to the youngest son of the wealthy Roman family featured in the first and second year textbooks. This boy was kind of a clown, and he had a talent for getting himself into trouble. The first few times he appears in the book, he falls out of a tree, falls into a koi pond, and gets yelled at by the family’s grumpy farm manager for making a mess the manager would likely have to clean up. Eventually, his behavior also gets him sent home from school. One thing this *puer molestus* always got as a result of his antics was attention, despite how his persistence rarely had a positive outcome for him.

The tendency to keep doing things to the point of annoying others is the common denominator among all sorts of pests. It’s how they nearly always manage to get exactly what they want. They don’t let things go. At their best, they get in our faces and do their best to change our minds and our hearts, and they don’t stop until they get what they want. That’s the dynamic present with the Canaanite woman in today’s gospel reading. She’s not just bugging Jesus because he’s there and she has a bone to pick with him. She is a mother who is desperate to help her sick child, and she will not take no for an answer. Her story is also not unique to Matthew. Mark also has a version of it, where the woman is identified as a “Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin” whose daughter has a demon. In both cases, Jesus is the last resort to heal this little girl – and in both cases, he is initially reluctant to do so.

While Jesus' response to the woman – “It's not fair to take children's food and throw it to the dogs” – sounds absolutely callous, it's what is required by the status quo at the time. Jesus is acting like any other rabbi would have been expected to. This unnamed woman is an outsider, maybe even an enemy. The community must be protected from her in order to preserve its ritual purity and its integrity. It's not clear whether she knows that or not, but what follows is an act of either worship, prayer, or outright humiliation. The woman kneels in front of Jesus, and asks him one more time for help, only to be called a little yappy dog and told to go away.¹

When Jesus goes low, the woman goes high. It's somewhat remarkable that she keeps addressing him respectfully as “Lord,” no matter how much the disciples or even Jesus himself don't extend her the same courtesy. There's also a little bit of word play going on here in Greek. The word for “Lord”, *kyrie*, sounds like the word Matthew chooses for “dogs” here (*kynarion*, which is literally a puppy). So she's more or less throwing Jesus's words back in his face in a very subtle way, even as she reframes his argument: “Yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table” (Mt 15:27, NRSV). It's enough to get Jesus to change his mind: “This woman's respectful persistence, wisdom, and endurance in the face of silence, rejection, and humiliation prompt Jesus to change his mind and praise her great faith, enabling her daughter's healing—starkly contrasted with the woman's own unwavering resolve from beginning to end.”² And it's this persistence which ultimately leads to an expansion of

¹ Richard Ward, “Commentary on Matthew 15:[10-20] 21-28.”
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-20/commentary-on-matthew-1510-20-21-28-6> [accessed August 10, 2026].

² Eunyun Lim, “Commentary on Matthew 15:[10-20] 21-28.”
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-20/commentary-on-matthew-1510-20-21-28-7> [accessed August 10, 2026].

the understanding of who Jesus and his mission are *for*. He's come to save the lost sheep of Israel... but those sheep now include people like the Canaanite woman and her daughter, who lack Jewish ancestry but who still, nonetheless, have faith in Jesus.

One of the major issues this episode raises is this: Is Jesus capable of learning something new?

If we go in the direction of how the Canaanite woman persuades Jesus to change his mind, in real time, then the answer to the question of whether he's capable of learning something new has to be a resounding yes. What he seems to get from this encounter is that God's kingdom, and his own mission to bring it near, are much bigger than he may have initially thought. It's not a question of what his apparent change of heart means for the interplay between his human and divine natures – splitting that particular hair is a whole graduate level seminar in theology – but rather one of how his very human imagination might have limited his choices to this point in his preaching tour of Galilee. It's not until he goes to Tyre and is pushed by this unnamed woman to rethink things a little that he seems to realize that even he is subject to the ongoing discernment necessary to understand how God's purpose unfolds in our lives.³

And that brings up yet another question: are WE willing to be open enough to God's leading to learn something new that stretches us, too?

The answer to that, for most of us, is probably, "It depends." It depends on how much the new knowledge challenges our ideas about who we are, what our place in the world is, and who God is. Regardless of what that new learning actually is, or the context in which it's received is, it requires us to listen, not only to the human(s) who

³ David Lose, "What the Canaanite Woman Teaches." <https://www.davidlose.net/2014/08/pentecost-10a> [accessed August 10, 2026].

might be presenting us with this new information, but also to God's leading in what to do with it. That listening might well lead us to ask even more questions. As Suzanne Farnham writes in *Listening Hearts*, "... answers emerge within our hearts as we live the questions."⁴ Those answers cannot be lived into alone. They have to be worked out with the support of others, whether that's a friend, a family member, or a whole community like this one. Even Jesus needed someone to get him to stop and think about what he was doing, with whom he had chosen to work, and why. I wonder: who are those people for us? What might they say to us? And how might we react to their request for change?

Let us pray.

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquillity the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*⁵

⁴ Suzanne G. Farnham, Joseph P. Gill, R. Taylor McLean, and Susan M. Ward, *Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community, Revised Edition* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1998), 75.

⁵ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing 1979), 291.