Pr 15A Matt 15:21-28

This story in Matthew chapter 15 is troubling, and we might skip it altogether if the lectionary did not present it to us to deal with. It stands out as one of Jesus' very human moments.

What makes it so difficult is that Jesus says some terrible things.

A Canaanite woman cries out to Jesus to heal her daughter. By the end of the story, the daughter is healed, but in between the crying and the healing, Jesus is arrogant, and just plain mean!

We may believe that Jesus was "truly human," but we don't want him to be too human.

So over the years interpreters and teachers have tried to clean up Jesus' humanity, to soften his words.

One attempt is to assume that Jesus was putting the woman to the test, to see if she had sufficient faith, and that when she passed it he said, "Woman, great is your faith. Let it be done to you as you wish." However, she actually made no confession!

Another try at softening Jesus' rebuke is to contend that the Greek word translated "dogs" really means "little dogs, puppies."

So when Jesus tells the woman, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," he really means puppies. I do not think that works very well!

Others have said it made a difference when the Canaanite woman knelt before Jesus – it was her submission that got to him - then and only then Jesus heals her daughter. I do not think that works very well either.
It seems that we have this strong desire to clean up Jesus, to make him what we want him to be!

However, Matthew does nothing to clean up this story for us. Matthew risks giving to us a very human Jesus.
His encounter with her takes place outside Jewish Galilee, outside of the safety of home, and he is vulnerable to trouble. Enter, as if on cue, "a Canaanite woman from that vicinity." As a Canaanite she is the archetypal other, more beyond-the-pale even than the Samaritans we see Jesus deal with so graciously in the other Gospels. She is part of an enemy people.
As a Canaanite and a woman she is meant to be kept at least two arms distance from this pious Jewish man.
But she seems to know who Jesus is, and begs him to heal her daughter who is tormented by a demon. One more needy person!
The woman is a screamer. She dogs Jesus and his followers with her cries, and uses Jewish flattery that she has no right to use. She calls him by name. "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!" It is the title reserved for the Messiah, the title his own people have withheld from him.
When this woman addresses him as the Son of David, it must seem like a mean trick of fate to hear what he most wants to hear coming from the mouth of someone he least wants to hear it from!

There are plenty of lost sheep from his own fold to attend to.
So he does not answer her a word. He draws the line, as surely as if he had leaned down and traced it in the dust at his feet.
Enough is enough! All these people and their demands! He will go no further. The store is closed! The doctor is out!

Let the Canaanites deal with the Canaanites!
"I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel," he tells her.
The disciples want nothing to do with her. "Send her away," they tell Jesus, "for she keeps shouting after us."
But this woman will not stay on her side of the line.
This Canaanite woman is going nowhere. She won't give up. She advances toward him, kneels down in the traditional supplicant position, and begs.
"Lord, help me."
This is where Jesus "goes to the dogs," as preacher and theologian Barbara Lundblad ventures. It is an outrageous put-down!
"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," he responds. A cruel rebuff if there ever was one!

Knowing that Jesus was a human being as well as the Anointed One, we can probably imagine what was going on with him. A long way from home, he was discouraged and weary, and as Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Every time he turned around someone wanted something from him, but at the same time no one wanted what he most wanted to give---namely, himself, in

terms of who he was for them and not only in terms of what he could do for them."

Can't we identify with that, to have people all around you, or so it seems at times, apparently more interested in what you can give them than in who you are; wondering how much to give and how much you have to give.
It is typical at our home that around suppertime the phone rings with a request. If it is not the Lupis Foundation or the Amvets it is the Congressional Reelection Committee, or someone wanting to know what TV programs we watch or asking to support people with various kinds of miseries. Animal rights, or child abuse prevention, or various civil liberties, and on and on.

You have to draw the line somewhere, to decide what you can do without being swallowed whole and never being missed.
Most of us come to that point and find that we draw the lines around our own families and friends, around our own causes and communities.
We draw the line around us, and like Jesus, we may get ticked off when outsiders start to step over the line that we have drawn to protect ourselves, what we think are reasonable limits. You have to draw the line somewhere!

Well, a kneeling woman does not have far to fall, and by rights that insult of Jesus should have floored her on the spot, and made her slink off into the crowds.

But the Canaanite woman is feisty and stubborn. After all, the life of her daughter is at stake. She comes back with a subtle variation on Jesus' theme, turning around Jesus' own words and responds, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fail from their master's table."

Matthew does not give us any indication of whether Jesus smiled at her word play and her cunning. We don't know what he felt at losing an argument, but when she says that, <u>something turns, something breaks</u> <u>inside Jesus</u>. He blinks. His anger dissolves. It is as if his sense of himself and his mission is rearranged within him and changed forever.

I believe you can practically hear it in his voice. "Woman, great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Jesus was converted that day to a larger vision of the commonwealth of God. Something very big happened. The line between Jesus and the woman was removed.

As Taylor writes, "You can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is and what he has been called to do."

Jesus saw and heard a fuller revelation of God in the voice and in the face of the Canaanite woman. Now he understands that he is called as God's chosen Messiah for the whole world and not just the lost sheep of Israel. A bigger purpose than he imagined.

The Canaanite woman deserved more than crumbs, and after this encounter Jesus went on to feed those who had not been fed.

The Canaanite woman's persistence not only made her daughter whole; it also showed Jesus the larger world he had come to listen to and heal. There is enough of him for all and the old lines are shattered by Jesus' new vision. They cannot contain him now. There is no more safety, no more certainty, no more controlling the limits.

The lines are removed and Jesus' arms are ever more opened to create space for all, until finally he gives them to be nailed open on the cross.

If Jesus could be changed, can we?

Every generation sees some people as "other" and puts them under the table for the crumbs. We all make the list, our own list of people we see as different – different race, different customs, different culture, different religion, different economics, values, politics, or perspectives. Isn't that the way it is with us?

But God's call to us means breaking barriers, erasing lines, embracing outsiders, giving up the notion that there is not enough of us to go around. The call of God is persistent, even more persistent than that of the Canaanite woman, calling us by name, calling us by the name of our congregation, St. Andrew's, until at last we step over the lines we have drawn with our fear and for our protection. And then we too are converted and discover new worlds without old limits.

Not having any reason to be there since coming to Denver in 2003, I confess to having formed certain impressions of Denver Health Hospital, based

entirely on unexamined assumptions. I carried the influential perspective that this Hospital was sort of the last resort and for the very poor and marginalized of Denver. It was for the other, and maybe not up to standards. I had drawn a line. It was not for me and mine. It was subtle, but real.

Recently, I have had opportunity for an in-depth experience of this institution whose motto is "Level One Care for All." I experienced not only the full human diversity of those served there, but at every level of health care a degree of competence and large-heartedness that reversed my impressions and renewed my confidence in how a city population can served without differentiation or discrimination.
I experienced the reign of God in action as hurting people were given refuge, level one medicine, and healing human touch. I could do nothing other than to erase the emotional and psychological line I had drawn that kept me from people not generally within my world, and from both the pain and the promise of such a noble enterprise. God turned up and called me over the line.

I recently saw a TV new report of a raucous town meeting where a white man who looked a bit like myself spoke through rage and tears, "What happened to MY America. I want MY America back."
I presume that he meant an America where people look like him and me.

Over the past ten years, many in the United States have come to see Muslims as the other. They are the Canaanites – not only in this country but in Europe and Scandinavia, as well.

I recall one sign carried outside the proposed Muslim Cultural Center in lower Manhattan that read, "All I need to know about Islam I learned on 9/11."

Is that so? What if someone protested outside of our church with a sign saying, "All I need to know about Christianity I learned from the Koran-burning Rev. Terry Jones."

A candidate in the current presidential primary race has called for a ban on building mosques in our country, echoing I suppose the disciples, "Send the Muslims away for they are ruining our country."

God's face can turn up anywhere, and most especially on the other side of the lines we draw to protect ourselves – in the urban poor in THEIR hospital, in the face of the Canaanite woman, in the voice of the politically opposite from us, in one seeking care or help or relationship that we are hesitant to give.

We can cling to our limits, fail to meet the eye of the other, hang back, keep a tight rein on our feelings.

But when we do that, God gets right down to work with us, blowing away the lines we have drawn and calling us to the limitless, vast country of God's love, converting us to a larger vision of the commonwealth of God.