

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

What in the world are we to make of this Jesus presented to us today.

If this story is unsettling to you;

If it makes you uneasy;

If it doesn't seem to sit right with you,
you have lots of company.

Scholars throughout history have gone to great lengths

to try and explain away this harsh, “out of character” Jesus.

Some of them say that this incident was inserted by Jewish Christians

who were offended by Paul's mission to the gentiles

and wanted the authority of Jesus to defend their cause.

In this argument the happy ending is a later addition

to compensate for the harshness of the beginning.

Another argument says

that the statement of Jesus only seems harsh to us in the present day.

These scholars say that the line about throwing the food of the children

to the dogs was just a common expression of the day.

They also point out that the Greek text uses the word for little dog,

indicating a household pet, and so should not be seen as abusive.

I don't know... that almost makes it more abusive to me.

Another argument tries to explain away Jesus' behavior

as being merely typical behavior for a man of those days.

All of these arguments may have merit, I suppose, in one way or another,

but why is it that we work so hard to explain away these apparent difficulties?

What is it about this passage that frightens us so?

Is it that Jesus, our loving savior, doesn't come off as so very loving?

Or is it perhaps that Jesus appears to need to be talked into helping a gentile.

And not so much talked into it as badgered into it.

I prefer to take this story at face value with all of its uncomfortableness,
for even without the explanations and excuses

there is good news to be had in this story.

I take great comfort in knowing that God can be swayed by good argument
-- backed by faith, of course.

If it were not so,

I am afraid that much of our prayer would be largely an empty endeavor.

Jesus says, "Woman, great is your faith!

Let it be done for you as you wish."

But were it not for her persistence in addition to her faith

her prayers would never have been heard, let alone favorably answered.

She had to whine and pester her way past the disciples

before she could even get to Jesus.

It may be unsettling

to know that there will be times when we may have to badger God
to make our wishes known,

but I take great hope from the fact that God will eventually listen.

That our prayers don't have to be polite or in a proper form to be heard.

In short, that prayers uttered in anger or frustration

are still prayers in the heart of God.

That we as simple humans

with all our frailties and foibles and faults

are actually invited to change the mind of God.

Sure, we have heard of this happening in many Old Testament stories,

but in those stories it always seems to happen with great leaders or prophets,
not with the common folk.

Here a simple Canaanite woman,

a gentile,

an outsider,
a woman with no formal connection to Jesus,
changes the mind of Christ.

Jesus was not her messiah. At first.

He did not come to the people of Canaan, at first,
but to the people of Israel.

And yet, thanks to this woman,
Jesus comes to know,
perhaps even to realize for the first time in his young life,
that his mission will go far beyond the people of Israel,
to include the whole world.

We owe a lot to this woman because in so many ways
we are this woman.

We are Canaanites, outsiders, gentiles.

Thanks to Paul we have been adopted into the family of God

But, we are, after all, only honorary Jews
and it may be that we too will have to badger our way into heaven.

Thanks to this Canaanite woman we have hope.

We at least know it is possible to badger our way in.

And we also have her to thank for illuminating another truth.

And like the harsh Jesus of this story,
this truth has a rough edge to it.

Did you happen to notice that the faith of the Canaanite woman
was the same at the beginning of the story
when Jesus completely ignored her,
as it was at the end of the story
when he granted her petition.

As a member of a disenfranchised group
Jesus did not acknowledge her at first.

It took her badgering and pestering to get Jesus to see her faith.
This encounter forces us to ask ourselves, how often do we look the other way
when we see disenfranchised or underclass people.
And if they push us, and badger us,
how often is our response one of annoyance or dismissal.
How often do we, like the disciples, say
“Send them away, for they keep bothering us.”
The truth is they need to bother us.
They need to badger us.
Because we need it.
Their worth in the eyes of God is no less than you or I,
and yet all too often we continue to see them as less.
We fail to see them with the eyes of God
until they badger us into opening the eyes of our hearts.
And the rough edge that cuts deep,
is that *we* should be doing the badgering for *them*.
For we know the gift and blessing of being accepted in from the outside,
if we would only just remember.
Have you heard the phrase
“There, but for the grace of God, go I?”
I would change it to
“There goes the grace of God for I,”
for you see, people on the margins are God’s special gift to us.
They are constant reminders of God’s grace.
A constant annoyance
compelling us to open the eyes of our hearts; the eyes of our souls.
It is so easy for us to fall into a comfortable state of entitlement.
We have so much to be thankful for,
and it is so easy to make the mistake

of thinking that what we have

is somehow a measure of our worth in God's eyes.

People on the margins are an annoying reminder that we constantly need.

For when those eyes open we will see them for what they truly are,

children of God, just like us; no better and no worse.

And we too, like Jesus, will have our minds changed.

And our hearts changed as well.

And if enough people open their eyes,

we can change the world.

And friends, it is so in need of that change.

We must continue the hard work of making into a very present reality,

the kingdom that Jesus came to reveal,

and fought for,

and ultimately died for.

As followers of the way that Jesus taught,

shouldn't that be at the heart of our mission to the world?

And when it comes down to it,

isn't that what we pray for every week when we pray,

“Thy [Your] kingdom come,

Thy [Your] will be done,

on earth as [it is] in heaven?”

It is time for our prayers to become more than just words.

It is indeed long past time.

Amen.