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**Reading for Revised Common Lectionary –Pentecost 11
Matthew 15.[10-20] 21-28**

**16 August 2020
Salem, Bridgeport**

“A Two-Way Miracle”

Some gospel passages are really challenging.
This one certainly is – for in it we have Jesus calling a minority woman a “dog”.
How on earth do we make sense of that???

There are many ways, of course.
Maybe Matthew got the story wrong.
Maybe Jesus was joking.
Maybe Jesus was being sarcastic.
Maybe Jesus was just echoing something someone else had said.
Maybe Jesus was just reading what was in the minds of his disciples.
Maybe.
Or maybe it’s just what it sounds like – Jesus uttering a racial slur.

Each one of us has to come to terms with this passage
and how we do so is very dependent upon our own Christology.
So if you believe that Jesus never sinned, you may answer in one way.
But if you believe that Jesus was human in every respect, then you may answer in another.
Each of you will need to make sense of this passage for yourself,
but let me share with you how it makes sense to me.

First, let me be clear: I believe that Jesus is with God and in God and is God.
I believe that Jesus is God’s Word made flesh.
But I believe that when Jesus left heaven
he laid aside his power and privilege, his authority and sovereignty, his full divinity, to become fully human.
Jesus was born as a baby
and so he had to learn to talk and walk and feed himself and read and write and reason.
And just as he had to learn those things,
he also had to learn who God was, and who he was, and who he was in relationship to God.
He had to discern why he was here, what his call was, what would give his life meaning.
It took him a while to figure it out.
In fact very little worth mentioning happened in the first 30 years of his life.
But then in the waters of the Jordan as he was baptized by John,
the Spirit descended upon him and something changed.
He had grown up as a Jew, he practiced Judaism, he became a Jewish rabbi,
and he felt called to reform Judaism.

But Judaism as the Old Testament makes clear was an exclusive religion.
It was all about being the chosen people.
It was all about being better, being more special, being more deserving of God’s favor.
Jews were inside the circle of God’s love; everyone else was outside.
Much of Jewish law was about keeping the boundary of that circle intact.
You couldn’t marry someone outside the circle.
You couldn’t eat with someone outside the circle.
Sometimes you couldn’t even touch someone outside the circle.
And because you and those with you inside the circle were chosen, better, more deserving,
those outside were obviously not worthy of favor, inferior, not deserving.
That was how Jesus had been raised; that was what he had been taught;
that was what he and everyone in his circle thought.

But then something happened.

Jesus had been preaching and teaching and healing and working miracles and he was tired.

He kept trying to get away to rest and to pray.

But the crowds kept following him.

He needed time to be refreshed, renewed, restored, but he couldn't seem to escape the never ending demands.

And so finally he told the disciples

“We've got to get out of town – we need a vacation – let's go to the seaside resort where no one knows us.”

And so they went.

And then this minority woman starts chasing after them! Really?!

As if his own Jewish followers weren't bad enough, now he had to put up with this nobody!

Jesus simply ignores her. But her persistent crying out annoys the disciples who ask Jesus to DO something!

When she asks for his help Jesus was clear: he was inside the circle and she was out.

There was nothing he could do for her; nothing he would do for her.

But this man had something she desperately needed and so she persisted.

He explained: “I was called only to the lost sheep of Israel.

The bread I have is for the people chosen to sit at the table; it is not to be wasted on a dog like you.”

But this was an amazing woman.

A lifetime of oppression and prejudice and insults had simply made her strong.

She could have reacted in anger and yelled something hurtful or hateful at Jesus.

She could have reacted in shame and humiliation and slunk away.

But through a lifetime of insults and slurs she had learned how to respond with charm,

combining truth and dignity with humor and humility.

Jesus had called her a dog,

and so she said, “of course! But even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table.”

And in that one sentence that minority woman changed Jesus and changed history.

Jesus had been following the God of Israel, but that woman knew that God was the God of all people.

Jesus had seen God's grace and favor and love

as something that was limited and could not be spared outside his own circle

but that woman knew that God's grace and favor and love had no limits.

Jesus had seen his mission as confined to his own circle,

but that woman showed him that the circle was large enough to include everyone.

Two weeks ago we heard about the miracle of the feeding of the 5000.

Last week we heard about the miracle of walking on water.

And this week we have a two-way miracle –

a miracle of the healing of a Canaanite woman's daughter by Jesus,

and a miracle of a Canaanite woman, the lowest of the low, teaching Jesus about God.

As human beings we all tend to draw circles around our own family, church, tribe.

We see ourselves as chosen, especial, is more deserving.

And even if we don't like to admit it, we judge others as inferior in relationship to ourselves.

We're smarter, we're better educated, we made better decisions, we deserve all that we have.

We draw circles and lines to separate us from others,

and yet perhaps it is those very others who can bring the greatest experience of God's grace into our lives.

The Canaanite woman opened Jesus' mind and heart and spirit

to a greater, more powerful, and more loving God than he had known.

God worked through her to change Jesus.

May God work through people outside our circles to change us –

so that we may know a more powerful, a more loving, and a more abundant God

than we have ever known before.

That's my prayer for myself – and for each and every one of you. **Amen**