Sermon on Matthew 15: 21-28

Let us pray: God of mystery, when words fail, may your Spirit be near. When hatred is unveiled, may you give us courage and kindness to show up in love. When we see our own vulnerabilities and limitations, may we have the courage, like Jesus, to begin again. Amen.

These are difficult days across the world, aren’t they? COVID-19 worldwide, so much distrust from nation to nation, culture to culture. Racism, xenophobia, and fear of other cultures are undoubtedly on the rise across the world on a scale not witnessed for many generations.

Today’s text touches on many social categories such as gender, religion, ethnicity, state of health, geography, and nationality. Outside of Israel’s borders, people are seeking Christ for what he can give them – freedom from demonic oppression. And not only does Jesus NOT destroy the Canaanites; our Gospel lesson today opens with Jesus going to these foreign lands. Jesus is breaking the boundaries that God had established. It is in these foreign lands that the woman of Canaan approached Jesus. She is on home territory, and Jesus is the foreigner here! Here they are walking through Canaanite territory, and the disciples are telling Jesus to send the woman away. Yet, she belongs. They do not! They are the foreigners. They have crossed the boundary set by God. Jesus can hardly send her away, since he is the one invading her land. He came to her, and since we believe Jesus did everything for our salvation, his presence with the Canaanite woman is also for salvation.

Numerous immigrants and refugees are very much like the Canaanite woman to us. But it is not only them, for many of us have distrust and dislike for any migrants, any poor, and any people of different culture or color. We want them to go away. Or maybe we – like the apostles – hope God will make them go away. Jesus, instead, mercifully answers their prayers. Jesus expects us, his servants, to do the same.

Jesus is giving hints as he teaches about the kingdom of heaven, that upside down kingdom in which human values, priorities, and sense of justice are turned on their heads. These hints into the kingdom show us that human logic or justice is not the ruling morality in that place where the first are last, and the greatest are the ones who serve, not those being served.
The Canaanite woman called Jesus “Lord,” and “Son of David.” Obviously, this woman knows something of the Jewish religion, and has also heard about Jesus. She has no interest in whether Jesus keeps the Pharisaic tradition, but she believes he has the power to heal her daughter. Like the woman with the flow of blood who wants only to touch the hem of Jesus’ garment, this woman wants only one thing from the kingdom – that her daughter be freed of demon possession. She is seeking from Jesus that power from God which the Pharisees have ignored in their obsession with keeping their tradition.

Jesus responds to the woman using imagery of the heavenly banquet of God’s kingdom - the image of food. If indeed this woman knows something of the Messiah and of Jewish beliefs, then she should also be aware that Jewish food restrictions will not allow her to eat of the same foods as the Jews. Jesus tosses out to her that he cannot share with her the food that is given to God’s people. Jesus cannot throw the bread from the children’s table to the dogs.

The Canaanite woman is not discouraged by his comment. She longs for the crumbs from the master’s table. Her faith is such that she is willing to accept whatever she can get from the master’s banquet in the kingdom. She is willing even to be a dog accepting the crumbs that fall from her master’s table. She is not demanding to sit at the master’s right and left hand, as some disciples did, but her hope is to be allowed to receive what falls from the table onto the floor. Even that will be a blessing from heaven. Being a dog at the master’s banquet in heaven is still a blessing. Her faith and priorities are straight. She has no claim to sitting at the head table. She values completely the smallest blessing that might fall her way, even if it is discarded from the master’s table.

The Gentile woman recognizes the value of what Jesus is offering. She cares nothing for being recognized as somebody. She cares nothing for show. She understands a crumb from the kingdom is more important than where she might be sitting when it is given to her. Indeed, the woman’s prayer is heard, all for the sake of a crumb!

Discrimination and racism are challenges encountered by immigrants and refugees as they endeavor to adjust to a new culture in the United States. For many of them, the role of religion and the support of the church community are sources of resilience.

“Woman, great is your faith!” As with the faith of the Canaanite woman, the faith of immigrants and refugees, and their strong belief in God, helped them through the tough
times they faced in their own, and in foreign lands. The faith of refugee families, before
and after their migration, played a significant role in shaping and building strength to meet
the challenges in a foreign land. As the church, we have been given ample opportunity to
play an essential role in helping families to resettle and navigate in their new homes. We
have been witness to the extraordinary courage and tremendous inner strength and
endurance they have displayed in adapting during their resettlement.

Siblings of Christ, our call is to present God who transcends racism and
xenophobia, to present a church that is bigger than ignorance and hatred, to model a way
of living that shows hospitality and kindness to those of other cultures, and those whose
cultures we might not understand. If the church will not take the lead in this at the current
time, then who will?

Matthew wanted us to learn the very simple truth that those we consider to be
“outsiders” can teach us about God. Jesus wants us to realize that we have more to learn
from others than we have to teach them. We are called to follow the example of Jesus and
embrace outsiders, so that we can show God’s love to them, as well as learn from them.

The story of the Canaanite woman reminds us that Christianity is not built on the
basis of ethnicity, but on the basis of our faith. Beloved community of many tribes, creeds,
and races, out of our fear and grief, let us birth kindness and courage. Let us birth strength
in community and resolve for the work ahead. Now, holding on to peace and love, let us
go out in hope. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Esther G. Ngomuo
Christ Kiswahili Lutheran Mission, Nashville, Tennessee