Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

St. Mary’s in Riverside, 2020

[*Canaanite lives matter*]

This current digital turn in worship

With livestreaming liturgies

online homilies

and podcast opportunities for spiritual communion

Has been an important develop for Roman Catholic

and other worship congregations.

While some consider these a stop gap enterprise

Many understand that these digital outlets

Will probably become a permanent part

Of a congregation’s liturgical life.

There are obvious downsides to this digital turn

and the limited capacity of worshippers

to interact with each other

or experience the ambience of a beloved worship space

or get the full spectrum effect of the music.

Yet there are some advantages here

as worshippers can live stream the Mass

whenever convenient.

adding new complexity to the age old question:

“When does the 10:00 a.m. Mass begin?”

The old answer was “it depends upon the presider.”

The new one is “depends upon when you log in!”

An unexpected wrinkle in digital worship is the opportunity

for worships not only to put Mass on pause

for a whole variety of reasons

but also to mute particular elements

including the homily

if and when it suits them.

A worshipper from afar recently confessed

that during live-stream worship she muted one homilist

instead reading a commentary on the scriptures.

She reported that this helped keep her blood pressure down.

If some at home have already muted me

then this point is lost on you

but for the others near and far

I make this point because if ever there was a Sunday

when I might mute some section of worship

it would not be the homily

And certainly not the music

But instead that very tough, even offensive gospel.

The other readings have their own revelatory bite to them:

In the first reading from Isaiah

We hear of the struggle within the Jewish community

returning from Exile

to a country increasingly populated with non-Jews

so we hear the beginning of a new kind of theologizing

that embraces the shocking revelation that all people

and not just the Jews

are invited into the covenant they previously thought

was an exclusive commitment between themselves

and the Holy One.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The thorny issue of inclusivity also arises in the second reading

In which Paul, a Jew,

Reveals himself as the apostle to the Gentiles

The apostle to the unclean,

to the outcasts,

to the spiritually lost.

Embarrassingly enough,

This student of the great Jewish teacher Gamaliel

So zealous in honoring God and keeping the law

the firebrand preacher and rising star

has been rejected by his own people.

In an attempt to embarrass his co-religionists

He turns his energy to non-Jews

Hoping that this will stir sufficient jealously

That at least some of them

will eventually embrace the gospel.

But the real mute button should be reserved for the Gospel

Those 8 verses from Matthew

beginning with a Canaanite woman

crying out to Jesus to heal her daughter.

By the end of the story, her daughter has been healed

but between the crying and the healing,

Jesus says some profoundly troubling things.

One blogger characterizes the Jesus of Matthew 15 as:

*arrogant, racist and just plain mean*.

Language that sounds even more inflammatory

Given this post-George Floyd,

Post-MeToo moment in history.

She continues:

We may believe that Jesus was “truly human,”

but we don’t want him to be too human.[[2]](#footnote-2)

So over the years, scholars have tried to clean up this story,

for example, suggesting that Jesus was testing this woman

to see if she had enough faith.

When she passed the test, Jesus commends her great faith

And the daughter is healed.

Ironically, the woman here makes no confession of faith.

She is persistent

recognizing Jesus as a healer or magician

but shows no evidence of believing that

he was the son of God.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Here’s another option to soften Jesus’ words:

the Greek word *kunarios* ― translated as “dogs”

really means “little dogs” or “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.

But does that really help?

Or does another suggestion help soften the passage that,

Because this woman submits to Jesus and kneels Jesus heals her daughter.

As one commentator noted

*A kneeling woman doesn’t have very far to fall.*

Matthew surprising doesn’t clean up this story.

and dares to depict a very human Jesus

encountering a don’t-mess-with-me mother.

She is a Canaanite not one of Jesus’ people.

On her home turf, and Jesus is outside

Both his hood and his comfort zone.

Matthew’s choice of words seems strange and pointed:

By Jesus’ time such people were no longer called Canaanites.

Matthew chooses this “ancient name” on purpose:

Signaling that she is not only the “other,”

but she is identified with an ancient enemy.

Yet she seems to know who Jesus is.

She begs him to heal daughter tormented by a demon

She’s desperate and comes out shouting.

Some scholars claim that the only women

who spoke to men in public were prostitutes:

a common ploy of treating people who are different

as morally suspect.

The disciples don’t want to think about such questions

They want nothing to do with her

“Send her away!” they tell Jesus.

But Jesus refused.

So a resolute? Or stubborn Christ?

Meets a resolute and desperate Mother

She may not be Jewish but she calls out to Jesus

in language borrowed from Jewish prayer

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David”

But Jesus isn’t swayed by familiar language.

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel,” he tells her

She won’t give up.

“Lord, help me,” she begs.

This is where Jesus goes to the dogs:

“It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to dogs”

But the feisty woman fighting for her daughter’s life

picks up his words and throws them right back at him

for even the dogs eat the crumbs from their masters’ table

Makes you wonder

Was she there in Matthew 14 for the feeding of the multitude

Or did she at least hear about it?

12 baskets of fragments left over

5000 men … not counting women and children?

So, maybe, she reasons,

For a change let’s count the women and children.

So Jesus relents

“Woman, great is your faith!”

Even though she hasn’t made any profession of faith

no sign she’s been born again

or even considered being a follower much less disciple.

**She simply spoke the truth:**

the children have been fed

baskets of food left over

Surely there’s enough for my daughter.

So Jesus relents …

and her daughter is healed.

By and large, the Gospels sidestep

what we might call Jesus’ psychological development

aside from one telling verse in Luke 2

that narrates how he went back to Nazareth with his parents

where he grew in wisdom and stature.

The gospels do depict his humanity and emotional life:

We see him grow tired of crowds

fall asleep from exhaustion

grow hungry and thirsty

emotions boiling over in anger at Pharisees

money changers and even his own disciples

He grieves hard over the death of Lazarus at Bethany

and grieves his own impending death in Gethsemane.

There is one gospel passage, however, that stands out

among these human moments

an occasion when we see him learn something new

and become someone different.

As recorded both by Mark as well as today’s gospel from Matthew

Jesus is brought up short by an unexpected truth.

Not only does he change his mind

but does so in a breathtaking 180-degree turn.

Most astonishing of all

it is a pagan woman who triggers the reversal.

One can almost imagine Jesus walking away from this encounter

Saying to himself, with some astonishment

Canaanite lives matter; Canaanite lives matter

maybe even working that line into his next public teaching

Of course he would get a lot of pushback

He usually did

And Jesus would counter all of the alpha males in the crowd

“Yes Pharisees’ lives matter

And Sadducees’ lives matter

And those from the house of David and the Levitical line

Their lives matter too”

“But,” I imagine Jesus would clarify

“you are all guys in position of power

You have all sorts of ways to assert

That your lives matter

It is such as these: Canaanite mothers

Samaritan divorcees

The leprous and the disfigured

The widows and other social outcasts

Even the children

Too whom the kingdom I am proclaiming also belongs …

Their lives matter as well

But who stand up for them?

Who exerts their power and capitol to remind society

That their lives matter just as much as yours?”

That struggle, unfortunately, continues yet today

And when one of those marginalized and belittled does stand up

To announce that their life and that their community matters

The baptized are confronted

In in the face of our stubbornness, our prejudice

To do what Jesus did … to change.

In that spirit the prophetess offers this “stubborn blessing”:

Don’t tell me no.  
I have seen you  
feed the thousands,  
seen miracles spill  
from your hands  
like water, like wine,  
seen you with circles  
and circles of crowds  
pressed around you  
and not one soul  
turned away.

Don’t start with me.

I am saying  
you can close the door  
but I will keep knocking.  
You can go silent  
but I will keep shouting.  
You can tighten the circle  
but I will trace a bigger one  
around you,  
around the life of my child  
who will tell you  
no one surpasses a mother  
for stubbornness.

I am saying  
I know what you  
can do with crumbs  
and I am claiming mine,  
every morsel and scrap  
you have up your sleeve.  
Unclench your hand,  
your heart.  
Let the scraps fall  
like manna,  
like mercy  
for the life  
of my child,  
the life of  
the world.

Don’t you tell me no.[[4]](#footnote-4)

So like the holy one, we dare to

Unclench our hands

Unclench our hearts

And let mercy flow … through Christ our Lord.

1. See Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 223-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/on-scripture-matthew-15-teaching-jesus_b_921497> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://liturgy.slu.edu/20OrdA081620/theword_cultural.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/08/11/stubborn-blessing/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)