May the words that come out of my mouth and our meditations of our heart be pleasing to you Lord. Amen.

This story can be quite shocking. We focus on Jesus and the many great things he does and how he has lifted up children and women, elevating them above simply being property showing that they matter and should be heard. Yet Jesus who has ventured into gentile territory seems to make exception to a gentile woman. This woman was shouting at Jesus asking him to have mercy because her daughter is tormented by a demon. From what we have heard and read about Jesus we would expect he would take mercy and cure her daughter from her demons. Way to go Jesus! Instead Jesus ignores her. Should gentile women be seen and not heard?

The disciples go into their protection mode, as if Jesus needs protection from them, and urged him to send her away since she is being such a nuisance, shouting at them. They only attention to her because they looked at her as being a nuisance, a bother, an irritation. Instead of rebuking the disciples for not being compassionate Jesus states that he was sent, literally that he is not an apostle for the lost people of gentiles but for Jews, in accord with the prediction of the prophets. This was done so there would be no pretext for the Jews rejecting Him as the promised Messiah. This is puzzling however since this contradicts, for example, the parable of the lost sheep where it states he is the Good Shepherd for all people, gentile and Jew.

So now we hear from the woman who is an underdog is instead like Mighty Mouse, has come to save the day. Her behavior is admirable. She actually shows willingness to be vulnerable by seeking help from a longstanding foe whom she knows despises her because of national and racial divisions. She even calls Jesus Lord and Son of David, things the disciples had difficulty seeing, and asking for her help Jesus responds “it is not fair to take the food and throw it to the dogs” She is asking help for her daughter so she is persistent in the face of insult, being in essence called a dog, and rejection, for her daughter’s sake. Her maternal instinct allowed her to risk it all for the only hope she had for her daughter being healed. She tells Jesus who calls her by the derogatory term dog and says, “but even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table.” She is the clear underdog who is able to accomplish what any mother would want, Jew or despised Canaanite — her child’s health and well-being. So we hear a story of remarkable faith in an unexpected place.

We see a very human Jesus. We can see ourselves in the action of the disciples Jesus’ attitude toward the Canaanite woman. It is certainly not out best self. We know very well our tendencies to define and fear an “other” on the basis of skin color, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, or creed, with our deeply ingrained prejudices that have been held for a very long time. We can easily resent being the concerns of “those people.” We focus on our own children and what we do for them. Others will persist however we have seen, asking for fair treatment and justice for their children. This challenges our justification for our actions that can be detrimental to others.

Yet, we see a persistent faith that stands its ground against all opposition that cause harm. This woman is not to be ignored, and against all the signs of apparent hopelessness, doggedly stands her ground as she persistently seeks the Lord’s help, even if it is only to be in those meager crumbs that might fall from the “master’s” table. Instead of being a pagan gentile, she has a grasp of scripture. Jesus calls her simply woman which means she represents all women. With this faith that she meets mercy the gracious healing power of God’s Messiah who tells her she is great in faith and her daughter was healed instantly.

Ultimately, the story is about Jesus, and in Jesus we finally see the very best of human potential in relationships with others, especially those we may avoid and fear. We see in Jesus the possibility of perceiving common humanity where we used to see only differences. And when we encounter the “other” as one who shares our humanity, hopefully we will cease to see them as “other” again. The Canaanite woman great faith, but Jesus has the last word: “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” Not “Canaanite woman” but simply “woman.” She will never be defined by national or racial or religious prejudice again. She is now a mother like any other who desperately seeks help for her child, as any mother would do. And for this mother’s sake, Jesus heals her daughter. And perhaps Jesus heals us, too, from the temptation to hang on to old stereotypes and habits that prevent us from embracing our common humanity. Amen.