

August 20, Ordinary 20A (Matthew 15:10–28; Romans 11:1–2a, 29–32)

Give me your tired, your poor, those you consider dogs.

by [Luke A. Powery](#) in the [August 2, 2017](#) issue

Jesus leaves familiar, comfortable territory and people—the disciples and the Pharisees—to enter a sort of red-light district, a place most people would not dare to go. Going there is socially unacceptable; it's where the so-called outcasts, unclean, and undesirables live. But we discover that the outsider finds a place on the inside of the heart of God.

Being both a Canaanite and a woman is a double whammy. Yet the Canaanite woman is not afraid to confront this Jewish man named Jesus. He's in her neighborhood now, and she has a desperate need—her daughter is tormented by a demon. What mother would not want her child healed? She goes against social and religious norms for the purpose of receiving healing for her child. She speaks up and out to this man she calls "Son of David" for mercy, not knowing what his response will be. She takes a stand, a risk, and crosses a borderline.

At first, Jesus doesn't even respond. But the disciples do, taking the opportunity to show their bias when they say, "send her away." The woman, to whom the text gives no name, receives no apparent compassion from the disciples. She is a foreign woman; they have no concern for her kind; they want to build a wall. And Jesus doesn't appear to react much better—he seems concerned only with exclusivity in favor of the house of Israel.

But this woman doesn't give up easily. She presses up against resistance; as a woman she is used to this. She continues to speak up and out until she gets what she wants. She knows there are cultural norms that may prohibit her deepest desires, but she is not willing to accept those norms as normative. She pushes against them and reveals her humanity to Jesus: "Lord, help me." She is a human in need like any other human.

Jesus seems slow in empathy toward her. He even calls her a dog—as opposed to a child of God, a human. Yet she doesn't allow his insensitive, insulting words to deter her. When Jesus says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," she replies, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat crumbs that fall from their masters' table." One might say her sass saves her. Because she speaks the truth, Jesus says her faith is great—and her daughter is healed. The truth opens the door to freedom.

This woman shows how a person can be bold and brave in approaching God without fear. She has her eyes on the prize of the healing of her daughter, and nothing can deter her—not even an apparent insult from Jesus. Society's strikes against her do not limit her faith, or her tenacity to reach beyond existential borders. Silence is not an option, only salvation and healing. She believes that her daughter, a human being, deserves healing—health care—like any other human being.

Though there is resistance at first, Jesus gives in to this foreigner and embodies God's mercy for all. Through engagement with the other, it is possible to learn of their human need—that is, that they are not dogs but humans, who have feelings, needs, and children, who desire mercy and healing like everyone else. Through this encounter, it is possible to see—even if the disciples do not—that we are more alike than different, that we are all children of God.

Jesus engages Pharisees, disciples, and Canaanite women, revealing the expansion of the heart of God to include foreigners and outcasts. God is an inclusive God; those we despise are our brothers and sisters, too. We may want to send them away but God brings them near, even to the master's table. Crumbs are enough for the Canaanite. It may not be what everyone else receives, but she's grateful for even a little piece of bread—because in the brokenness of that crumb, her daughter finds healing. She fights for a little piece of the dream so that her child's nightmare can end.

And it does end, because the Lord has mercy on her—revealing how ultimately, as Paul puts it in the reading from Romans, God is "merciful to all." Jesus welcomes her and her daughter—however begrudgingly—despite cultural, religious, and gender differences.

This scriptural border crossing brings to mind "The New Colossus," the sonnet by Emma Lazarus inscribed on a plaque on the inner wall of the pedestal of the Statue

of Liberty, the “Mother of Exiles”:

From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome . . .
“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

A poetic remix might add, Give me those you consider dogs. Send these to me: the refugee, the alien, the foreigner, and more. Send the wretched refuse, the ailing daughters of ostracized women, because they yearn to be free. The unnamed Canaanite woman reaches out to touch the golden door of God, to set her daughter free.