

# Including “Those People”

## Lessons from the Canaanite Woman

*Matthew 15:21-28*  
*College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa*

*Rev. Todd B. Freeman*  
*August 17, 2008*

I would like to begin by reading the following actual newspaper editorial.

There is a very unpopular group in American cities. The “best” people in the cities say that this group is hopeless. They are devoid of ambition, quarrelsome, drink too much, fight too much, are inclined to be brutal criminals, have too many children whom they do not know how to bring up to be proper citizens. Because of their sloppy ways and their dirtiness, they are prone to illness. They do not know how to protect the health of their children. They are a drain on the economy and the finances of the cities. The neighborhoods in which they live are unsafe at night and often in the daylight too. They simply do not have what it takes to become good Americans. No more of them should be admitted into the country.

This blatantly prejudiced editorial sounds like something that could have been written in support of Oklahoma’s anti-illegal immigration Bill 1804. In actuality, this scathing assessment directed toward a particular group of people was compiled from an editorial written more than 100 years ago. It was referring to – the Irish!

Well, I happen to be of Scotch-Irish heritage (as are probably many others in this congregation) and I find it disturbing to think that I would have once been one of “those people,” part of the despised “others.” But now we’re in a new century, and we have new “others.”

Race, ethnic heritage, and culture aren’t the only things used to label “those people,” however. We all know the list far too well – its made up of whatever one set of people wants to use to distinguish and distance themselves from another set of people. And religious organizations and political parties are among the most guilty of this division tendency to separate people into “us” and “them.”

And before we get too self-righteous about all those “others” that do this, **let’s look in a mirror and notice just who it is that you and I, that we, distinguish as “those people.”**

Let me give you an example from just this past week. I was invited to join a group of about 20 folks at Kendall Whittier Elementary School to have an open discussion with Dr. Keith Ballard, who has been offered the unenviable position of Superintendent of Tulsa Public Schools. He told the school board that he needed a couple of weeks to make up his mind, and is using this time to visit with teachers and community leaders throughout the city.

When Dr. Ballard asked us to share any particular concerns, I said that as a pastor I was concerned that religious fundamentalism be kept out of our public schools, and that teaching a tolerance for diversity be a priority. He gave what I consider to be a very good answer, assuring the group that he held the same concerns.

In the context of today's sermon, however, I realized that I have fallen into the same trap: labeling fundamentalists with an agenda, as well as those who are intolerant, as "those people." Yes, I have had to look into the mirror and acknowledge my temptation to be intolerant of the intolerant.

So I ask you again, **who is on your list of "those people" or "the others"?**

All of this is by way of introducing what I consider to be a particularly disturbing story from Matthew 15. It's a story filled with apparent prejudice and the blatant labeling of "those people."

Let's face it, Matthew's telling of Jesus' encounter with a Canaanite woman is a story that's hard for many of us to hear because it seems to present Jesus as responding in an uncompassionate way to the cry for help from this Gentile woman. This seemingly "exclusionary" Jesus is not the Jesus we remember from Sunday School.

The story begins by mentioning that Jesus and the disciples head to the district of Tyre and Sidon. These ancient Greek cities were located north of Israel on the Mediterranean coastline, in the land of the Phoenicians. These cities are still in existence today in modern Lebanon.

It's interesting to note that this story describes one of the very few occasions in which Jesus ministered outside the territory of ancient Palestine. So at one level this is a remarkable story because it foreshadows the going out of the gospel to the whole world. Biblical commentator William Barclay even states: "It shows us the beginning of the end of all the barriers."

But before that happens, however, we are told of an encounter between Jesus and an unnamed Canaanite woman, shouting at Jesus to heal her daughter. We read that Jesus' initial response is simply to ignore the woman who is desperately seeking help for her child. **Intentionally ignoring another person in need is often one of the worst and most demeaning kinds of slights.**

The disciples chime in at this point and advise Jesus to send her away. We talked about this common response on the part of the disciples a couple of weeks ago in the story of the feeding of the 5000, when at that occasion they also wanted to simply send the crowd away to have them meet their own needs. If it were up to the disciples, they would have kept this woman away from Jesus altogether.

When we put ourselves into the role of the disciples in this story, it begs the tough question of **whether we harbor any attitudes or actions (be it subtle or not) that have the effect of trying to keep others away from the presence of God.** Something to think about.

Yet the woman persists and won't take no for an answer. At this point we are given the impression that Jesus has no other option but to respond to her directly. He tells her, in essence, that she is not part of the mission statement for his ministry, that his efforts are reserved only for the Jews. The story presents Jesus as casting the woman into the category of "those people" and "the others."

In an act of humility, however, she kneels before Jesus, saying, "Lord, help me." I have often taught and preached that **this is perhaps one of the most profound and powerful prayers anyone can ever pray: Lord, help me.**

Jesus responds with a comment that strikes us as uncharacteristic, unduly harsh and insensitive. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (v. 26). Such a statement seems to imply that non-Jews are subhuman and undeserving of God's concern. But is that really the message Matthew was trying to get across?

Several biblical commentators make various attempts to relieve the story of its obvious embarrassment. Some say that Jesus was just testing her faith; others say Jesus was struggling in his mind with the idea of a Gentile mission; yet others say that Jesus was bringing the woman to an appropriate humility. But all of these together do not smooth out the surprisingly harsh tones and apparent rudeness of this encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman.

Canaanites, you may recall, were the ancient indigenous population before the Israelites arrived and sought to exterminate them from the land.

In response to Jesus' seemingly rude remark about comparing Gentiles to dogs, the woman cleverly uses his analogy and with obvious wit replies, in effect: "Fine, treat me like a dog, but at least let me have the crumbs that fall from the table." Her clever use of Jesus' own image demonstrate to him that there is still a way that she might receive a portion of God's bread.

The woman does not deny the children of Israel the primary seat at the table. Yet, she asserts that there remains a place for her as well. **She insists on being included. And she has become a role model for others who have needed to insist on being included in the church as well.**

Whether Jesus needed to be taught this lesson for himself or not is debated, but it certainly demonstrates that Jesus now sees how the table of God now set before Israel may be stretched to accommodate a far more inclusive group of diners. The power of this Gentile woman's faith pushed the perimeters of Jesus' vision and moved him further along the road toward God's plan for human salvation.

These, then, become the greatest lessons that we can learn from this Canaanite woman:

- **How can we, as College Hill, accommodate an ever more inclusive group of diners at the table?**
- **How can the perimeters of our vision move us further along the road toward God's plan for inclusion of all people into God's kingdom?**
- **When and how should we insist on being included?**

Yes, others may be different from us, and yes, of course, there are even differences among ourselves. It's okay to acknowledge that often what makes others different is something we don't like. **And while we will never be able to be as inclusive as God, let us at least be aware when we tend to label others as "those people."**

**In addition, I would venture to guess that many of us here in this congregation have also experienced what it feels like for ourselves to be labeled as "those people" by others.**

So let us remember then this lesson from the Canaanite woman, that God draws the circle wide enough to bring everyone in; that there is room at the table for all.

Amen.