

Desperate situations seem to make an outward show of emotion acceptable. When we're surprised by events – death, new life, rescue, fear – we let ourselves go. We've all seen pictures on the television of women and men wailing with grief over their children slaughtered in a bomb attack in the Middle East. They often collapse in unbearable pain over the bodies of their precious children. So perhaps we can understand the emotional outburst of this desperate Caananite woman in today's gospel? Emotions seem to explode from us when we're desperate – desperately sad or desperately happiness.

But isn't it interesting that we often also feel uncomfortable with a show of emotion? How often have we heard the words, "You'll get over it," or "Keep a stiff upper lip," or "Don't cry, it was only a dog"? Somehow, our Western culture especially has evolved to a place where keeping it all inside is best. We don't want to make others uncomfortable, even when we're being torn apart inside.

The disciples are not much better. As the woman keeps shouting after them, they ask Jesus to get rid of her. "For heaven's sake, give the woman what she wants." Do they say this out of compassion for her plight? No, but "because she is shouting after us". To them she is merely a nuisance, and a pagan nuisance as well. How often have we given in "charity" just to get rid of a bothersome beggar?

The Caananite woman had a very sick daughter and she was desperate enough to break many of that culture's rules concerning encounters between women and men. She shouted not only at a man, but at someone special. But she not only shouted, she threw herself at his feet when he ignored her. But she not only did *that* – she argued with Jesus. She put herself in danger of severe consequences. Her desperation overcame her fear and cross several firmly established boundaries.

We're surprised when Jesus first ignores her, and then seems not only to ignore his own teaching, but he is rude to her. "I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel." What? Isn't the second great commandment to love your neighbour as yourself? Jesus said so himself. The poor Canaanite woman!

She's an outcast, not only from the Jews, but even from the Gentiles. At first, even Jesus resists her boldness. Was he tired from moving from city to city and did not want to be bothered? Did he have more important things on his mind like knowing the agony of death he would soon face? Who knows, but him.

But he's done this kind of thing before. Remember the wedding feast at Cana? His mother wants him to help out the wedding couple. "They have no wine," she says. "What's that to me, it's not my time," Jesus replies. Not quite the way we might expect him to answer his mother. But he reacts by expanding his ministry perhaps a little early.

Here, he is first mindful of his mission to the Jews, the first of God's chosen people. This woman is pushing the boundaries. She's a Caananite, not of the family. Like Jesus' own mother, this woman knows he can help her. Jesus very well may have been impressed with her persistence, and he pushes just a bit. "It's not fair to throw the children's food to the dogs." How typical of that time. The Caananites were considered less than respectable by the Jews. But is it typical only of that time? Here's another lesson this passage teaches us. How have we considered the "other" in our own cultures? If we're honest, there are those we consider less than dogs today.

But this Caananite woman is not only desperate, she's fearless. "Even the dogs get the crumbs on the floor." A Pharisee might have slapped her down for that remark, but Jesus seems finally to get by his own frustration and see her as a woman of faith. Once again he expands his mission and breaks down a barrier to accept and include a non-Jew. This is a big step for him. Matthew is showing us how Jesus' mission and ministry is growing, tearing down centuries old boundaries, and opening up the culturally identified family of God to all God's people. In both instances, Cana and the need of this woman, Jesus responds to the marginalized. In these cases, to women, but there will be many more – the blind, the crippled, children, outcasts of all kinds. Our first reaction to Jesus' seeming rudeness is turned to an understanding of what he knows is happening. Jesus seems to enjoy fearless people who aren't afraid to engage him on human levels of love and emotion.

We are being asked here to examine ourselves our hearts for any signs of racism. Whom do we think of as less than dogs? Living in our current culture of fear is hard. We are bombarded with images and words coming out of some of our own leaders' mouths that put the fear of the "other" into our hearts. Jesus might remind us, "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles." Today we have a lot to think about when we consider this.

"Thank God I am not like other people." It would be dreadfully offensive if we said, "Thank God I am not of another race or culture." Yet we do find ourselves thinking such things as we watch the news or engage in heated conversations about those people who don't agree with our politics or religion or social attitudes. It makes it worse when we are sure we are right and they are wrong. Being bigoted against bigots is no virtue!

It is so easy to hate.

But:

"Above all, don't lie to yourself.

The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others." Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Jesus tests the woman. He even uses the common racial slur. "We don't give dogs human food." Please note that Jesus is not merely saying that dogs shouldn't beg at a table. He is using a dreadful slur to test the faith of the woman. We may find that shocking. Please note he is not being a racist. He is testing the boundaries that have been set. May they be crossed? The woman is desperate, but can she, is she able, to step through pride and prejudice and reach the point of acceptance and healing?

Shortly, before we share The Sacrament, we will join in these words "*We do not presume to come to this thy table, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercy.*" The prayer is built around the gospel lesson we are using today. By "righteousness," we can mean pride, or confidence in our own culture, or learning, or intellect, or good taste, or manners. We might mean our own racial, or political, or national roots.

We always need to be reminded that Christians should show our actions in word and deed. We need to experience the mercy of God, the forgiveness of their sins, the healing of our bodies, and of our minds and spirits, as we build our faithfulness.

Jars of Clay song:

We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord
And we pray that our unity will one day be restored
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
Yeah they'll know we are Christians by our love

We will work with each other, we will work side by side
We will work with each other, we will work side by side
And we'll guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love
Yeah, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

We humans keep on drawing circles where only "me and mine" belong. The circles, some people think, will keep us safe. The circles will keep "them" out -- whoever they may be. But the funny thing is, God keeps drawing bigger circles. God's circles are not meant to keep out anyone. God's circles are meant to invite people in.

Today's Gospel is not about faith in what we deserve. It is about faith in the grace we need. It is about our struggles for justice, righteousness, and dignity right in God's face. Today's Gospel is an affirmation that God's love and mercy are extended to all who call on him in faith and trust, no matter who they are or where they are. In God's eyes there are no 'dogs'. And the food on the Master's table, the Lord's Word and his Love and not just the crumbs, is for all without exception. The Dalai Lama offers this wonderful saying: "The more you are motivated by love, the more fearless and free your action will be." This is exactly what Jesus shows us today.