

From the week's Old Testament Lesson, from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah:  
*Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD.*

Jeremiah 17:7a

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It seems to me that there's something hardwired into human nature that likes to draw lines. Maybe we sometimes imagine that we're a little better as a society than we used to be about drawing those kinds of lines around people of colour; but there's been a ton of evidence in recent years that proves that the world is just as plagued by such bigotry as it's ever been. But, whether or not we're any better on distinctions of race, we still like to draw all kinds of lines, sometimes without even realising it: economic or social or professional or national or regional lines; lines base on gender or age; lines around those who suffer from addiction or mental illness. All kinds of divisions and lines. And, in each case, the lines that we draw around others and the distinctions that we make, are lines defined by our fears: by our fear of those things and those people and those cultures that, in some way or another, are different than we are. Now I suspect that we could trace many of those fears to our evolutionary past. Fragile lives lived in a harsh world probably necessitated an instinct for protection and preservation: and family and tribal and cultural groups were likely our most reliable places of safety when faced with something different or new. But what place do the lines that we draw around those who are different, and the distinctions that we make about others, and what place do the fears that lie at the heart of all those distinctions, have in the Kingdom of God? I think that this week's Gospel speaks deeply about what Christ thinks about the lines that we draw around others. And it's a story that centres on some very firmly drawn lines in first century Palestine. Fresh from a battle with the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus retreats to Gentile territory; to a neighbouring region populated not by Jews like him but Canaanites. Now, we need to understand that the people of this region, the Canaanites, and the Jews had been enemies for a thousand years; bitter, life and death kind of enemies.<sup>1</sup>

So, knowing that, try to imagine this amazing event as it unfolded. She doesn't belong in their company. She knows that as well as everyone else does. She's a foreigner. She's an enemy. And in that context she has the double crime of being both a Canaanite and a woman. But as much as she knows that she has no right to call upon the aid of this Jewish Messiah, she does so none the less: "*Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David,*" she cries; a cry not for herself but for her daughter; just as you or I would cry out were our son or daughter to be deathly ill. But amazingly, there is no response at all from Christ. Not a sound, not a word. We are not given any indication that He made any gesture at all. The disciples try to get rid of her. They know that she's not supposed to be there. She doesn't obey the same Law. She doesn't eat the same food. She doesn't go to the same church. In their minds, she is little better than a dog: a descendant of the very people who, years before, had fought desperately against God's People for the land they were living on; the very same people whose existence has been, for so long, a grave threat to the peace and security of the nation.<sup>2</sup> So, the disciples try to remove her. She's

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<sup>1</sup> ... while of the Phoenicians it is known the Tyrians have been most of all in the same ill disposition towards us."

*Against Apion*, Flavius Josephus, translated by William Whiston: <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/2/8/4/2849/2849.txt>

<sup>2</sup> It's a story that unfolds in that in-between land between Israel and Phoenicia, in a time of rising nationalism and violence; in an area into which each wished to expand. (Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991, pages 61-80)

a nuisance; and they insist that she not disturb Him. They do all they can to send her away. But when all their efforts fail in the face of her persistence, they appeal to Jesus to dismiss her: *Send her away, for she is crying after us*. Surely, if she would not listen to them, she would listen to Him. *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel”*, Jesus replies. In other words, I’m not here to help people like you. But that still does not deter her *“Lord, help me,”* she pleads as she kneels before Him. *“Lord, help me...”* Three small words of immense anguish and pain. *“Lord, help me”*, as she looks into his eyes, trying desperately to see some sign that He has heard and understood.

But in response, she receives only words of even greater horror and rejection: *“It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs”*, Jesus answers, saying out loud the words that must have been on the lips and in the minds of those who watched this sad and pathetic scene. And what must she have thought? All she wants is some help for her daughter; and she might have answered with anger; with the bitterness that she must have fought from rising up inside of her. ‘Don’t speak to me about what’s right’, she might have cried. ‘Is it right that my daughter is ill?’ ‘Is it right that she has to suffer so much?’ ‘Is it right that I must see her in such agony, I who gave life to her; I who nurtured her?’ But we hear none of that from her. We hear only words of incredible humility and trust: *Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table*. And, at its lowest point, this whole living, breathing, parable is over. The woman who is unclean, unholy, unrighteous in the eyes of all those around her has shown greater faith than those who were so ready to judge her.<sup>3</sup> She understands; as the disciples had to learn in that challenging, life-changing encounter;<sup>4</sup> as we too must understand, that we all come to God with no right to demand His love; that we receive it by grace, just as she too received that love by grace, when Jesus healed her daughter.

I struggle with this story; and I struggle with the picture of Christ which I find at first glance. But I recognize in the words of the disciples, and even in those horrible words which Christ speaks to this Canaanite woman on their behalf; I recognize the very same temptation that I find within my own heart to stand in judgement of others; to reject them; to draw lines around them; to look down on them; just as the disciples rejected that woman, all because they fail to meet some arbitrary standard which I’ve established in my mind as important. We close the very same doors of fallen, broken, humanity that Christ died to open when we turn our backs on those who differ from us; or when we close the door of love to those who have offended or hurt or insulted us or angered us. And we do it all so readily because we forget that we too have sinned; that we too have offended and hurt and insulted and angered others; that we have no monopoly on righteousness and holiness. As the prophet Jeremiah reminds us in this week’s Old Testament Lesson, it all comes down to trust; not living in fear of others but trusting God’s love so much that we are willing to surrender our fears. The hero of today’s gospel is a poor Canaanite woman; a woman who acts out of her faith in the power of Jesus; a woman who asks out of love for her daughter; a woman who perseveres because of her hope in the goodness of God: faith, hope and love opened for her the closed door of the house of Israel. What closed doors might faith, hope and love open in your life?

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Just a couple of decades after the time of this story, violence will break out in this region as Jewish nationalists attack non-Jewish cities at the time of their rebellion against Roman rule. (A. Kasher, *Jews and Hellenistic Cities in Eretz-Israel*, TSAJ 21, Tubingen: Mohr, 1990.)

<sup>3</sup> Epistle for Lent 2: *For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness*. 1 Thessalonians 4:7

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps it was the praise that Jesus heaped on her faith that came to mind years later when those same apostles were wrestling with the question of what to do with Gentiles who came to faith in Jesus Christ.