First Congregational UCC
August16, 2026
Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey
“Yes, And”; Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Matthew 15:21-28

You hear her before you see her. Some people avert their eyes in pity. Others can’t look away. She does not abide by the rules of respectability. A Canaanite – a gentile – should not speak to a Jew. A woman should not approach a man. Not even if her daughter is tormented by a demon. But this Canaanite woman approaches this Jewish man anyway.

She knows who Jesus is. She knows that he is no ordinary man. She addresses him as her Lord. She knows he is a Son of David. And she knows that he has the authority to help the daughter she loves so much.

Jesus says nothing. She keeps pleading, unwilling to take silence for an answer. His disciples have had it. This woman is distracting people from the ministry Jesus is meant to do. *Make her go away*.

The first words Jesus utters in her presence are indirect. He was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Demon-possessed Canaanite girls are out of his jurisdiction.

The woman persists. She kneels, dignity be damned. All she wants is for her daughter to be made well. And she knows this man can do it. I imagine her next words in a hoarse almost-whisper. Jesus is near now. She prays a beggar’s prayer on her knees. *Lord*, *help me*.

She does not back down when Jesus says the thing we don’t want him to say: *“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”*

Oh, brother. Oh, Jesus. It's one thing to explain that he was not an all-purpose holy man, only sent for the people of Israel. Maybe it's a little like saying we should not assign a physics class to the literature professor. Or try to clean our laundry using Windex. He's just trying to stay in his lane, that's all – the Jewish rabbi-prophet lane. But what Jesus says to the frantic mother goes way beyond a simple no. It is not nice to imply that people are dogs. Here I am, trying to put in a good word for this guy Sunday after Sunday, and he is not coming off well in this story.

In improvisational comedy, actors create scenes out of thin air, without the benefit of a script. There's a principle in improv called "yes, and." If someone throws out an idea – even a crazy one – their scene partner has to accept it and run with it. If we are doing an improv scene together and I scream that my hair is on fire, you can't tell me it's not. You either need to become a firefighter or pull out a bag of Jet-Puffed marshmallows. You say yes to my flaming head of hair, and you build on the story. Yes, and.

Something like this seems to be unfolding in this scene. The woman says yes. She doesn't argue his point. She improvises. She affirms the uncomfortable thing Jesus has said. It is *not* fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. There are more than enough crumbs to go around. So, *heal my daughter*.

Her response immediately moves Jesus to act – he commends her great faith. And the demon is evicted.

For as hard as it is to take Jesus's words in this exchange, I love – love! – that we encounter a loud, clever, faithful, and persistent woman trespassing against social conventions to advocate for her daughter.

It's remarkable that the Bible elevates the voices of women when women's voices were often marginalized. It's amazing that the Canaanite woman speaks with such wisdom and authority – such wisdom and authority that Jesus apparently changes course.

This text makes us so uncomfortable we are in danger of flattening it, of forgetting how consequential it is in the whole sweep of scripture – in the grand scheme of everything. It goes back to the question of who Jesus is sent to save. And it goes back to a question that isn't in our texts but is one I've heard many times.

Why should we assume there's anything special about one particular religion that popped up in the Ancient Near East thousands of years ago? Why do we pay more attention to the Creation stories in the book of Genesis than the Babylonian version of how everything came to be? Why do our holy scriptures tell us God made a covenant with Abraham and promised to give him descendants as numerous as the night sky? Why do we read about the Law that God gave Moses and the Israelite people? Why do we ponder the words of Isaiah, who called the Israelites back to the ways of justice and righteousness?

Why do we follow a rabbi-prophet who isn't even always very nice? Many people are often more comfortable with general spirituality than specific religions, and it doesn't get more specific than the Old and New Testaments, full of histories and genealogies and covenants and contexts.

Why? Because the biblical story contains an extraordinary yes/and.

In an era when most gods were tribal – called upon to protect the interests of any given group – the remarkable thing about the God of Israel is that from the beginning, this God was never intended to be limited to one geography or ethnicity.

Israel is chosen by God and blessed by God, and through Israel God intends to bless all people. God's mercy is particular but not narrow; specific but not exclusive. Consider Isaiah's prophetic vision, which extends beyond the people of Israel to foreigners. They, too, are gathered in. They, too, are brought to God's holy mountain. They, too, are made joyful in God's house of prayer, a house that becomes a home for all people. Just as a mustard seed grows into a great tree, the trajectory of salvation moves toward radical inclusion. We might say, this is the mountain of the open door. No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

Yes, Israel. *And* everyone else.

This moment in the region of Tyre and Sidon is the moment when the Son of God, a fully divine and fully human Jewish man named Jesus, said yes to this. Maybe their exchange was a test, and the faithful Canaanite woman passed. Or maybe he really did need to learn from her, just as he needed his mother to teach him how to tie his shoes. We don't know, because Matthew doesn't tell us. We do know, however, that our highly specific religion centers the noisy, persistent voice of a woman of great faith.

And we can trust her. She speaks the truth. This Jesus, in whom she put her faith, was not merely capable of liberating her daughter from whatever demon held her in thrall. In the Kingdom of Heaven, this Jesus will liberate every daughter and every son from every sorrow and every shame. This Jesus is the one sent to gather us as siblings in the family of God. This Jesus is our Lord. He may not always fit our expectations. He is not a tame savior. But he is Lord. Thanks be to God.