

A sermon preached on 12th Pentecost, at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT
on August 16, 2026, at the Baptism of Charlotte Florence Greenough by The Rt. Rev. Gordon Scruton

Proper 15-A Track 2: Isaiah 56:1, 6-8. Psalm 67. Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32. Matthew 15:21-28

For over a year, we as a parish have been praying with Aversa through her pregnancy and the joyful birth of Charlotte. So today is very special for Charlotte, Aversa and Alex, for their family and friends, and for all of us in the congregation as we celebrate Charlotte's baptism.

And, surprisingly, today's gospel reading focuses on a mother coming to Jesus and asking him to help her daughter. At first that sounds wonderfully appropriate for today, but for centuries people have been offended and confused by this story. Jesus seems to speak and act in ways that are not consistent with his character and his teachings. So, let's explore this story together to see what God's Spirit might want to teach us.

Let's begin by looking at the context of this story. In the first part of the chapter Matthew reports that a group of religious scholars came to publicly criticize Jesus for violating some of the Jewish purity laws. Jesus was a faithful practicing Jew throughout his life, and he did not criticize the Jewish rituals. But Jesus does push back at his critics by pointing out that caring about the needs of people is more important than being rigid and literal about observing all the religious purity rituals.

Jesus was often criticized by the more literal minded religious leaders for healing people on the Sabbath. Yet Jesus kept healing people on the Sabbath because he wanted everyone to recognize that caring and responding to the needs of others is more important to God than rigid observance of the Sabbath rituals that ignore the needs of people around them.

After this confrontation, Matthew tells us that Jesus left that place and walked about 47 miles north to the district of Tyre and Sidon, by the Mediterranean Sea.

Both his critics and ordinary people would have been shocked that Jesus chose to go there. When Jewish people of the 1st Century heard the names of Tyre and Sidon, they were immediately suspicious because this was pagan territory where people worshipped the fertility god Baal. There had been conflicts between Canaanites and Jews for over a thousand years, and Jews carefully avoided that dangerous, hostile place.

So why did Jesus go to such a controversial place on that day? Matthew doesn't tell us. He simply says that as Jesus and his disciples neared the border between the countries, a Canaanite woman started shouting to Jesus, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

We don't know the name of the woman or the name and age of her daughter. We don't know if the girl needed to a demon exorcized or if she had epileptic seizures or some neurological problem. All Matthew tells us is that the woman was a Canaanite. (Mark refers to her as a Syrophenician woman.) This means that she was from a different racial group, a different religion, and she was a woman. By strict interpretation of Jewish purity laws, all these factors labeled her an unacceptable person to talk with. So how would Jesus respond to this woman?

What was also unexpected and startling about this woman was the way she talked to Jesus. She said, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." The word "Lord" was used in that culture to describe the powerful Roman Caesar. So, it was both a political and a religious statement for her to call Jesus, "Lord". And "Son of David" was a description Jews used to describe the Messiah they expected God to send to liberate Israel and restore God's shalom to the nation and world.

How could a woman from a different “cultural region”, race and religion know that these code words were accurate statements about who Jesus was? Even his disciples did not always recognize that Jesus was both Lord and Messiah. Had she heard traders or women immigrants who had been in Israel tell stories about Jesus when they came to her region? Perhaps they told stories of how he healed sick people. However she heard about Jesus, she had a passionate longing to get help for her sick daughter and deep confidence that this Jesus had the power to heal her daughter. So, she was willing to make a public fool of herself by yelling out to Jesus, asking for his help.

At first, Jesus did not answer her. Why do you think he didn’t answer her right away? Matthew doesn’t tell us. Could he have been thinking /praying about how best to respond?

Perhaps the disciples were embarrassed by the silence of Jesus, so they filled in the uncomfortable silence by urging Jesus to send the woman away because her constant shouting was irritating them.

Eventually, Jesus responded. He didn’t tell the woman to be quiet or to go away. But his response was different than most of his responses to people who were considered outcasts. For example, Jesus initiated a conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well and carried on a long respectful conversation with her. Why in this case did he respond by distancing himself, saying that he “was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”? He had healed a servant of a Roman Centurian who asked for help. Why would he not have simply healed the daughter of this woman?

Scholars have offered many possible suggestions, but the truth is, we don’t know. It certainly seems that he was saying, I came to help Jewish people not pagan foreigners like you. Was he tired from all the arguments with critics and all the healing of the crowds that came to him for help? Was he speaking out of exhaustion? That kind of response is very out of character for Jesus in other situations.

For example, in the first sermon Jesus preached after his baptism, in his hometown of Nazareth, he quoted from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” At first people loved his sermon, but then Jesus pointed out the challenging implications of his message that they were not expecting. He said, “there were many widows in Israel at the time of Elijah, when ...there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except the widow at Zarephath in Sidon. (Remember, Jesus and the woman in today’s story, were also in Sidon). In his first sermon Jesus continues, “There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophets Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” Again, another foreign outsider.

The hometown congregation was furious that Jesus was pointing out from the Hebrew Scriptures, how God had not helped Jewish folks during difficult situations, but he had healed and helped pagan foreigners, women and men, who were considered outcasts by Jewish purity laws. The hometown crowd was so furious, they became a mob driving Jesus out of town, planning to push him off the cliff to his death.

So, if Jesus was courageous enough to tell his hometown synagogue that God had sent him to preach and bring God’s love and healing to people who were considered outcasts, why was Jesus contradicting his own sermon by telling this woman from Sidon that he was only sent to help Jewish folks and not people like her? I wonder what his disciples thought as Jesus said these out of character words?

Now comes another surprise: Instead of being depressed and withdrawn at what Jesus had told her; instead of running away weeping or yelling out in anger, the woman walked up close to Jesus and knelt down in front of him and simply said: “Lord, help me.” She did not give up. She moved closer to this man who had just rejected her request. She spoke from her aching heart, humbly begging for Jesus to heal her daughter.

Often, when Jesus was interrupted by a parent begging him to heal a sick child, Jesus had compassion and did what they asked him to do. But at this moment, Jesus again does the opposite of what he normally does. He says, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” What a cruel insult! How can compassionate Jesus call this hurting woman who is begging him from the depths of her heart to heal her daughter... a dog, saying it’s not fair for him to heal her daughter, because healing Jewish people is more important?

As we begin to get angry at Jesus for his insensitive and cruel comments to a woman longing for him to heal her daughter, let’s pause for a moment and explore what the word dog meant in the Hebrew language. There are two Hebrew words for dog: first, “kyon” which means a wild, filthy street animal. It was a common insult used in that culture to humiliate and marginalize people they didn’t like.

The second Hebrew word for dog is “kynarion” which Jesus uses here. It refers to a little dog, a beloved lap dog that lived in people’s homes. It is still a jolting word to use, yet it radically changes the tone of the comment when we learn that Jesus was saying it is not right to give healing to beloved little lap dogs. Jesus is implying that the woman and her daughter are beloved, valuable members of the family, but not as much of a priority as the human children in the Jewish family.

How will the woman respond to this offensive comment from Jesus as she is kneeling before him? She has a surprisingly gutsy response. Jesus gave her an opening by referring to her and her daughter as beloved lap dogs. So, she creatively takes the opening and pushes back at Jesus saying: “Yes Lord, you are right (about the importance of Jewish people), yet even the little lap dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” So, it is right and appropriate for you to heal my sick daughter.

I can imagine Jesus smiling at her feisty response. He has enormous respect and compassion for the persistent trust of this woman in his power to heal her daughter, and he responds:

“Woman, you have enormous faith, extraordinary trust in me. Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

This is one of the very few situations in which a person argued with Jesus, and Jesus acknowledged that she and her persistent faith won the argument, and he healed her daughter.

So, what was Jesus trying to teach and communicate through this complicated interchange with this woman? Was he challenging her and strengthening the depth of her faith in him? Was Jesus trying to help his disciples, and us, to see that people who are considered outcasts may have more genuine trust in God than many religious insiders do? Was Jesus continuing his teaching theme that too often people’s understanding of God’s love is more restricted and narrow than the generous love Jesus showed for people who were considered outcasts and unworthy of God’s love?

What might Jesus want to say to you this morning about the quality of your love and your relationship with God as you ponder this interchange between Jesus and this gutsy woman?

Let’s close our eyes and in the silence, let’s listen for ways Jesus might want to connect this story with the way we pray and live our lives this week...

O God, this week, in the midst of all that we do not understand, help us to have more honest and gutsy interchanges with you about the important concerns in our lives, deepen our trust in you, and expand our awareness and practice of your generous love for all that you created. AMEN.