

There are times when you really just wish Jesus hadn't said it. There are times when you want to dig deeply into what was happening to try to explain away the most uncomfortable scene in all the Gospels. But no matter what you want to do to justify or excuse what Jesus says, you can't.

He said it. He called her a dog and told her that her daughter didn't deserve God's mercy.

I'm sure some of you have heard the ways we've tried to turn this into something else. "Jesus was just testing her...Jesus was offering an object lesson to the point he had just made to the disciples."

They make Jesus much more palatable in this encounter. It makes it easier not to ask the hard question: what if he meant it? What if Jesus was simply saying what he believed to be true?

The book of Hebrews says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." For some, it is the core tenet of their faith, that Jesus is perfect, always has been and always will be. The only way for **that** to be true is if we know for a fact that he **was** only testing this woman, or the disciples.

But what if Jesus isn't the hero of this story? Yes, Jesus is the Messiah. Yes, Jesus is God enfleshed in this world. But what if God himself has a lesson to learn – the same one he had just tried to teach the disciples? Some would think that a heresy, but perhaps we can acknowledge that we don't understand God perfectly, so even if we want to say that Jesus is perfect, we might not know exactly what that means.

And we can't say that God never changes, or that God doesn't rethink things, because it happens...in Genesis, in Exodus, in the story of Jonah.

There are scholars who have dedicated their life's work to understanding the nature of Jesus. It's the study called Christology, and if you want to read books, you could read them from now until eternity, and you'd

find disagreement and disparate theories. You won't find consensus on how we're supposed to understand Jesus, because no matter how much we try to hold onto certainty, we simply can't. We can't truly understand what it means for God to be human. We don't know the mind of Jesus.

The Gospel writer didn't give us what Jesus was thinking. All we have is what Jesus said. And Jesus did not want to include this woman in the redemptive work of God. She represented everything that was outside of the covenant – named to be one of the people God had expressly removed from the land and denied their place. She wasn't actually given a name, that would have given her an individual identity but she was cast out of the kingdom because of where she was born, without even *acknowledgment* of her humanity.

Except she wasn't. In the span of two sentences, she changes the mind of Jesus. She claims her place within the mercy of God's Kingdom. Jesus had just finished saying that what comes out of our own minds and mouths defiles us – not the way we follow the rules of cleanliness, but how we act.

And then he fails to act. He ignores her. He hears a call to dismiss her from the disciples. He hears her plea and he tries to deny her. But she will not be denied. She simply claims the crumbs, the leftovers. It wasn't so long ago that Jesus had compassion on the sick and hungry crowds. He hadn't dismissed them like the disciples asked but fed them with a miraculous abundance. And now he reversed course and refuses this woman and her child a share in that abundance.

We don't get to see into the mind of Jesus, but what I want to see most is not why he referred to her as a dog, but what it must have felt like to realize she was right. It reminds me of the climax of "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" when his heart grows three sizes. I want to see what happened in Jesus' when he realized this woman mattered. To God.

Her and her daughter were not castoffs from the Kingdom. They may not have fit into the cultural boundaries of contemporary Jewish society, but

God's Kingdom was bigger than that. The roots that the status quo was desperately trying to hold onto were being ripped out – not to create more outcast plants, not to deny the Pharisees in the kingdom – but to include everybody in God's mercy. Jesus' understanding of his work on this earth **changed**.

In this moment. In this encounter, we see the truth of God's grace most clearly. We see that the barriers even Jesus had tried to hold onto have no place in the Kingdom.

We see that the abundance of grace will overcome our reluctance. The abundance of mercy that this woman claims becomes the core tenet of our faith. In a world that lives and breathes scarcity, what might it look like to be so gracious and merciful that nothing is beyond our concern?

It's easier to hold onto the status quo – to the roots of what always has been our understanding of God and God at work in the world. We should, instead, expect things to change. Constantly. God's love might be the same yesterday, today, and forever but what God is doing in the world is going to change to meet the needs of the world.

We're always going to be pushed to break new boundaries, to find new ways to proclaim God's love, to name people not as outcasts from the kingdom, but an integral part of it. Nobody is a dog. Nobody is undeserving. Nobody is outside of the Kingdom. We learn that from an unnamed Canaanite woman who had the guts to stand up to God – to change God's mind. Thanks be to God that Jesus listened. Amen.