

A Doorway into Another World

**A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on August 16, 2026 (Rally Day)
Covenant Presbyterian Church**

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that moment.
(Matthew 15:21–28, NRSVue)

All over Athens this month, doors are opening. Some of them are brightly decorated classroom doors, with construction-paper letters and names taped carefully beneath them. Some of them open into crowded hallways alive again with shouts, slamming lockers, and squeaking sneakers. Others are dorm doors propped open with boxes still scattered across the floor, while somebody's parents make one last trip to the car and try very hard not to make too much of saying goodbye.

August is full of thresholds. And if all goes well, something more happens when students cross them than simply moving from one room into another. A child who has known letters mostly as shapes begins to discover that they can carry words, and then sentences, and then stories. A microscope reveals whole worlds of life hidden from the naked eye. History deepens the ground beneath our feet with lives and struggles that came before us, while another language teaches us that the same world can be seen and named in other ways. At its best, education enlarges the field of vision. The world was already larger than we knew; we simply had not yet learned to see it.

And today, on Rally Day, we are standing at a doorway of our own. Another program year begins. Children move among classrooms. Choir rehearsals, Bible studies, fellowship gatherings, mission work, meals and conversations begin to fill the calendar again. Before long, the halls will be busy enough that some of us may occasionally find ourselves wishing for the (relative) peace and quiet of July!

But surely the Christian hope is larger than simply becoming "busy" again. We don't gather for another year because the church needs enough activities to keep everyone occupied. We gather because, however long we've been at this, there is more of God to know, more of one another to discover, and more and more of this world to see through the strange light of grace.

Karl Barth once wrote that "within the Bible there is a strange, new world, the world of God." It's a quote I've known and loved for years, because Barth names something I think Scripture

does when we allow it to become more than just a storehouse of familiar religious ideas. We may open the Bible looking for confirmation of what we already believe and find instead that the familiar furniture has been moved around. The boundaries appear in different places. People we had pushed toward the edge are standing near the center. What looked like weakness begins to resemble strength; what looked like foolishness begins to carry wisdom; what looked secure begins to feel terribly fragile; what appeared hopeless turns out to be the mustard seed of God's new future.

Over the coming months, I want us to spend some time wandering around inside that strange new world. But the point will *not* be to *escape* from this one. In fact, quite the opposite. Scripture has a way of returning us to the *same* streets and kitchens and classrooms, the same public life and private griefs, and yet allowing us to see them all differently. And this morning, when Matthew opens the first door for us, look who's standing there: *A Canaanite woman!*

Canaanite! That word right there recalls some very *old* stories! "Canaanite" reaches backward toward Israel's earliest memories of the land – toward the peoples whom Israel's ancient conquest traditions remember as defeated and dispossessed more than a thousand years before. By *Jesus'* time, *no one* used that word anymore, which is precisely why Matthew's choice of it is so striking. He wants us to *feel* just *how far outside* the familiar circle this woman stands.

Jesus has gone far north into the region of Tyre and Sidon, beyond the ordinary bounds of his *life*, much less his ministry. And out of that foreign landscape comes a woman crying after him: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

There's something startling about these words coming from her mouth: *Lord ... Son of David*. That language belongs deep within *Israel's* hope, yet it's being spoken by someone Matthew has just identified with Israel's ancient foes. Before the disciples have said a word about her, Matthew's story has already begun playing strange games with our minds!

But beneath all that, of course, is something painfully simple: a mother and a suffering child. Whatever has brought terror into that girl's life, her mother has heard that Jesus heals. So, she comes after him, calling out across every barrier of custom, religion, ethnicity, and "good taste," because sometimes love for another simply has no time for any boundaries that say, *This far and no farther*.

What follows is one of the most unsettling encounters in the Gospels. Jesus first meets her plea with *silence*. The disciples want her sent away, and when Jesus finally *does* speak, he draws the boundary sharply: his mission is to the lost sheep of *Israel*. Even when she *kneels* before him – "Lord, help me!" – his answer places *her* beneath the table: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Christians have spent centuries trying to make those words less harsh than they sound, but I'm not sure Matthew wants us to. He lets the boundary stand there in all its force. But then this

woman does something remarkable: she looks deeply into that very image that seems to demean and exclude her and notices something no one else has seen: *Crumbs*.

"Yes, Lord," she says, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." She takes the very image that places her beneath the table and discovers, hidden within it, an *overflow* of mercy! Bread has already fallen within reach. Somehow, she trusts that this fount of grace she has encountered in Jesus *cannot* dry up just as it reaches her daughter. And Jesus answers, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

Now there's something especially wonderful about hearing this story one week after the one we heard last Sunday. Out on the sea, Peter had climbed from the boat and begun walking toward Jesus. When fear overtook him and he sank, Jesus caught him by the hand and said, "You of *little* faith, why did you doubt?" *Peter*: one of the Twelve, traveling with Jesus, hearing everything, seeing everything, eating the bread from Jesus' own hands ... *Little* faith! And now, on *foreign* ground, an unnamed "Canaanite" woman whom the disciples would gladly have sent away ... *Great* faith!

Matthew doesn't simply widen the room. He *rearranges* it! And this is where the story becomes more demanding than the familiar Christian teaching to "welcome outsiders", which has proven to be hard enough. We certainly *should* welcome people. Isaiah's vision is clear on that: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." The church has spent *enough* centuries putting locks on doors God intended to open.

But if that's *all* we hear, we can *still* leave ourselves comfortably in charge of the arrangement. We are the people who possess the house. We know where the furniture goes. We know the traditions and the language and the proper way things are done. Then, in an act of generosity, we open the door for someone else and say, *Come in. We have something wonderful to give you!*

Matthew 15 unsettles even that gracious picture! Because the Canaanite woman doesn't enter this story empty-handed. She brings a love for her daughter fierce enough to endure silence, annoyance, and humiliation. She brings the courage to speak when respectable people wish she would just shut up. She brings an imagination supple enough to take a painful metaphor and discover an unexpected mercy hidden inside it. And she brings a faith that Jesus names as *great*. The people who thought she had come only to *receive* something, discover that she has something to *teach*.

And that is one of the deepest truths of Christian community. The child entering a classroom for the first time is not simply an empty vessel into which adults pour knowledge. Children notice things we grownups have learned to overlook. They ask questions our sophistication has trained us to avoid. Sometimes they hear the wildness and wonder of a Bible story more clearly than we do, because familiarity has not yet worn its edges smooth.

And the same is true beyond childhood. A person new to the church can see customs invisible to those who have practiced them for forty years. Someone shaped by another culture hears a text through another history. Someone who has lived near the edges of economic security knows things about “daily bread” that cannot be learned from a bible commentary. Someone who has spent years wondering whether there was a place for them in the church may hear Jesus’ language of welcome with an ache and a joy that those of us who have always taken our place for granted cannot manufacture.

This is why genuine inclusion is about something deeper than kindness. Exclusion wounds the person excluded, yes, but it also impoverishes the community doing the excluding. Voices disappear. Questions go unasked. Gifts remain unopened. Wisdom never flowers. The world becomes smaller, and the people inside may never even notice what they’ve lost.

You see, that’s why Isaiah’s vision is so much larger than a building with generously unlocked doors. “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” Imagine what that *means* once all those peoples *actually arrive*. Different accents rise in prayer. Different histories enter the collective memory. Different wounds alter what mercy sounds like. Different gifts reshape the common life. The house itself begins to understand its Host more fully. And that’s what another program year is finally *for*.

Yes, I hope our children *do* learn the old stories of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Mary and Peter, and learn that these stories are *theirs* too. I hope our adults read deeply enough to be challenged, not merely reassured. I hope music gives us language for things ordinary speech can’t hold. I hope friendships deepen around tables, that hands become useful in service, that our common life becomes ever more attentive to the places where our neighbors hurt.

But maybe most of all, I pray that the Spirit keeps us *teachable*. Because churches can keep every physical door open and still live in terribly small worlds. We can welcome people into a room without allowing their presence to alter anything. We can say “All are welcome” and then quietly require everyone who enters to learn *our* language, absorb *our* assumptions, and take their place in a house whose arrangements are never allowed to change.

The Gospel imagines something else – something *more alive*. Sometimes the people we think we’re opening the door for, are the very people *through whom* God opens the door for *us*! And that is a more vulnerable kind of welcome, because it means we don’t know beforehand what will happen when the door swings open. *We* may have to learn something. *We* may have to surrender something we once thought we knew. A room we thought we understood may suddenly look different because another person has entered it carrying a history, a wound, a question, a gift, a faith we didn’t know how to recognize before.

But this is how the strange new world of God becomes visible – not as an escape into some distant religious realm, but as this world itself begins to look larger beneath the light of grace.

At the beginning of Matthew's story, the Canaanite woman is outside. Outside the people. Outside the mission. Outside the table. The disciples hear her as noise and want her sent away. It all turns on the crumbs! Fragments of bread falling from the table ... A woman kneeling in the dust, seeing abundance there ... Mercy spilling over the edge! By the end, her daughter is healed, her faith has been named great, and the boundary that seemed so fixed has become a doorway into a larger world.

Doors are opening all across Athens this week, and another stands before us here. Beyond it lies a world larger than the one we already know, because God is always larger than the maps we draw. And perhaps one of the first surprises waiting for us there will be to discover that the people we thought we were welcoming in, have been standing on the other side all along, holding the door open for us, and waiting to show us how abundant the feast has always been – to the glory of God! Amen.