

# GROWING *Together*

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## JESUS MEETS A PERSISTENT WOMAN

Half the women in the Gospels are unnamed. They interact with Jesus to be healed, to minister to him and even to challenge him. They break the boundaries of race, gender, religion, law, status and tradition. Such a one is the Canaanite woman whose daughter is ill. (Mk. 2:24-30)

In the Gospel story, Jesus has withdrawn to the seacoast outside Galilee to seek seclusion, rest and time to reconsider his mission. He is discouraged. His cousin, John the Baptist, has been beheaded. Jesus himself has been rejected in Nazareth and he is in conflict with the Scribes and Pharisees. Even though crowds surround him and individuals keep pleading for healing, his closest followers doubt him.

Now a pagan woman breaks in on his desired peace. Though Jesus ignores her, she keeps pleading, "Help me, O Lord, my daughter is severely possessed by a demon." The disciples beg Jesus to get rid of her. Jesus tells them, "I am not here for outsiders." (Is he thinking aloud? Questioning his own ministry?)



The woman hears the comment. She draws forward. She kneels at his feet and pleads, "Lord help me." Jesus dismisses her abruptly, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Acknowledging that she is not of the chosen people, she retorts, "Yes, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall under the table." Silence...

Slowly, Jesus understands his mission more fully. He exclaims, 'O Woman! Great is your faith! Let it be so.' She goes home, and finds her child lying in bed, the demons gone.

As we listen to the story we are troubled by the conversation. We do not expect Jesus to be insensitive and harsh, to be tired and to have human needs. What are we to think of him, and of this woman whom he has called a "dog"? What about this language? Some say Jesus is testing the woman's faith. Some say it is the language of racism and superiority, the kind of language sometimes heard in our churches, courts and schools.

Other details in the story beg for attention. The table and food denote hospitality, openness and welcome: the Bread of the Word, the Bread of Eucharist. Should these be restricted? Open to all?

In our world, who have places at the table? Who are under the table, eating crumbs, leftovers? Why are millions of our children starving? Whose voice is pleading for the children of the world?

The encounter with the Canaanite woman touches that tension in Christian faith between prophecy and compassion. Jesus believes he is a prophet to Israel only, and therefore not to foreigners. Now he is confronted with a demanding, annoying female, a foreigner with no right to speak to him. Yet her faith astounds him, giving him new courage.

Jesus' encounter with her answers some of those doubts and questions he had withdrawn to resolve. He knows now that his mission extends beyond the house of Israel to all who are open to his message.

We Christians some times judge ourselves more worthy than people of other faiths. We might do well to look at this woman, unnamed though she is, as our mother in faith. She awakened in Jesus the realization that God's love and compassion are unlimited, extending to all human beings and indeed, to all creation.




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