In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon.” (Matthew 15:22, RSV)

This Canaanite woman is our hero! We rise or fall with her. Let us keep our eye on her in her dealings with Jesus. Let us admire her love for her daughter and the lengths to which she is willing to go to seek help from Jesus. What a splendid soul she has! She has heard good things about Jesus, she has gone out to cast herself upon his mercy, and she will not be deterred from her hopes in him. She is like some great boxer, staggered by hard blows yet hanging in there, fighting her way through to victory. Seldom does Jesus praise the faith of the people he heals. Indeed more than once he laments, “O ye of little faith.” But this woman: ah, she wins his approval. She gains his admiration. “O woman,” he exclaims, “great is your faith!”

The deck is stacked against her. This is indicated in our text by the note that she is a Canaanite woman. She is not an Israelite. In fact she comes from the ancient enemy of Israel – the Canaanites. I lift up this note about the woman because her story can work its way out to encouragement for you and me. Our hero – this woman – teaches us that however doubtful our case should be, we should approach Jesus in trust. We should fling our hopes and dreams, sorrows and disappointments on him, even if we should imagine that we are strangers to him, or unworthy of him. Let none of us be doubtful about Jesus. He is Lord of the universe. He is King of Kings and Lord of lords. He is high and mighty, righteous and pure, but above all he is loving. The weary soul, or the sin sick soul, that comes to him he will in no wise cast out.

I have said that the deck is stacked against this woman. Let me briefly explain why. One of Israel’s deepest convictions is that of all the nations in this world, she is the chosen people. Israel is the people of God. This is an ancient conviction going back to Abraham. The man had left his home, his kindred, his accustomed ways and rhythms of life... The man had left all in order to follow the LORD. And because of his faithfulness in following the...

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1 An exception to this rule and another example of Jesus’s praise for the faith of Gentiles is his praise of the Centurion in Matthew 8:10.
2 Matthew 8:26, 14:31, 17:20.
LORD, he and his descendents were promised that they should be a great nation on earth (Genesis 12). Many times the LORD’s love for Israel had been demonstrated, from the Exodus from slavery in Egypt to the release from Babylonian captivity. Many times the LORD had demonstrated his love for Israel, including the sending of the prophets to her. Jesus too continued this focus on Israel. His marching orders to his disciples had limited their ministry to Israel:

5These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: 6But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. (Matthew 10:5-6, KJV)

In our story today Jesus seems determined to abide by his own rule:

And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying after us.” 24He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matthew 15:22-23, RSV)

Do you see what I mean when I say the deck is stacked against her? She is not an Israelite, the disciples want her to go away, and even Jesus speaks discouraging words to her, especially when he calls her a dog.

Still, there are reasons for hope for our hero, and some of those reasons can be found in today’s Old Testament reading and Psalm. In our reading from Isaiah 56, the LORD speaks of “the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD.” He says of these foreigners that he will accept them and make them joyful:

7these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer;

And is not this Canaanite woman in today’s gospel story such a one? And then in this morning’s Psalm – Psalm 67 – Israel rejoices in the destiny of the nations to be guided by Israel’s God:

4Let the nations be glad and | sing for joy,* for you judge the peoples with equity and guide all the nations | upon earth.

And is not this Canaanite woman in today’s gospel story such a one? Is she not one who desires to sing for joy and to be guided by Jesus into health for her daughter?
Well, you know the good outcome of this story: because our hero persists in prayer and will not give up her appeals to Jesus, he praises her faith and instantly heals her daughter.

Now, let us take her story and apply it to ourselves. Many of us are glad to join in the hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” We sing it with gladness in our hearts and love for Jesus. But really, it is a remarkable thing that some of us should be friends with Jesus. For he is high and holy while we are low and of mixed character – a frustrating combination of good and bad. He has a good record and a good conscience, while many of us have done things we regret or feel hopelessly lost in even now. He has the adoration of the angels and the communion of saints, while many of us are nothing special and are often overlooked. It is quite a thought that Jesus should welcome and save us. But he saved the Canaanite woman and we should be pleased to think that he welcomes and saves us too. The fact that she was a foreign woman, and that the disciples seemed impatient with her, and that Jesus himself treated her roughly did not mean that she was lost. And if you and I should have some disadvantages in life and doubtful points in morality, we nonetheless should look toward Jesus with confidence of his love and acceptance and desire to lead us into a more holy life.

What were this woman’s virtues, and are they within reach for you and me? She faced obstacles, especially the fact that she was not part of the “in crowd,” but she fought through all obstacles to victory. What were her strengths and are they not available to us too? Well, the first strength we can see in this woman is her reverence toward Jesus. She addresses him with a high title. Indeed she addresses him with a title that probably sounded strange in her own ears. She calls him “Lord” and she calls him “Son of David:

“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon.”

To see how striking this is recall that the Lord had commanded Israel to conquer and to destroy the Canaanites. Yet here is a Canaanite, who sings her Kyrie – her plea for mercy – to Israel’s Messiah, the one she calls “Son of David.” She has heard good things about Jesus, and so she tries her hand at what at first must have seen a strange and difficult manner of speech. But she does it, and you and I can do similar things. Though it might feel strange at first, we can nonetheless cry out to Jesus, “O Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” We can dare to cry out to the Lord of the whole universe. Little us! We can cry to him, for in the end the Lord wants us to do so.

Second I noticed that her cry to Jesus is within the spirit of Jesus. She is not asking for wealth, or fame, or long life for herself, but rescue from a demon for her daughter. She is turning to Jesus out of love for her daughter. God
blessed her for that. You and I can also be bold in approaching Jesus when we are asking for something good – something that we think he believes in too. This is possible for us, to approach Jesus in something of his own spirit.

Third I noticed that she illustrates the very virtues that Jesus had commended in his preaching. She did not return evil for evil, insult for insult, but rather continued in a generous spirit. She did not give up in face of opposition. Her ability to hang in there is akin to what Jesus asked of his disciples:

“Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves,” said Jesus to his disciples. “...and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved.” (Matthew 10:16, 22 RSV)

This woman endured to the end and received her reward. You and I can endure some hard times too – even times when it seems that Jesus does not hear our prayers. We can hang in there with him as did this Canaanite woman so long ago.

Finally I notice the worshipful stance of this woman. She comes to Jesus in spite of every obstacle, she kneels before him, and she yearns for bread – even if it is only the scraps that fall from the table. This is you and me. Sometimes we stagger forward toward the Holy Communion. Sometimes we wander forward as if moving through a fog or through a gloomy night, we are so discouraged or so confused about our path. Yet we can do this thing. We can come to church where Jesus has promised to be. We can come to him in Holy Baptism, and we can come to him again and again in the Holy Communion, receiving from him the Bread of Life we need for the week lying ahead of us. These things lie within our strength. We can follow the example of this Canaanite woman and in the end we can receive great gifts from Jesus – help in this present life and salvation in eternity.

4 All of our readings today have a common theme – it is a theme of belonging. Throughout history and even today, questions are raised about who belongs and who doesn’t. These days, with all the turmoil around immigration issues, racism, political and religious divisions, and so on, questions about who belongs and who doesn’t are being raised right and left and all over the place! But in the midst of all this turmoil and division and even violence, today’s Bible readings remind us that the One we call “Our Father” seeks to gather all people to Himself – to unite us in His holy presence

3 Refer to Barbara E. Reid’s discussion of Matthew 15:21–28 in the Lectionary Commentary on the Gospels.
4 This concluding paragraph comes from this morning’s sermon by my wife, Rev. Carol E.A. Fryer, Director of Pastoral Care, Wartburg, Mount Vernon, New York.
– one people, one world, worshipping one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever, amen.