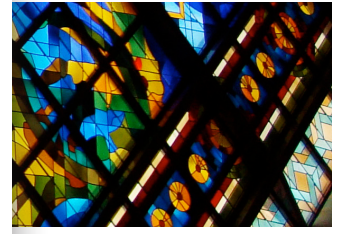


# 40 DAYS OF ENGAGEMENT on *Anti-Racism*



DAY 24

## The Canaanite Woman

*Pierre Goldberger*



### Learning

*Pierre Goldberger*

The dynamic story of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21–28 and Mark 7:24–30) has followed me for years, especially at certain times in my life: when racism and violent colonialism against Indigenous peoples burst forth during the Oka crisis in Québec, during my years spent supporting the Maya peoples in Guatemala, and throughout a close relationship with the Haitian community in Montréal, as well as our partners in Haiti. A similar disregard, whether hidden or open, marks the dominant White society of which I am a member with full benefits. No one looks away from me or refuses to rent me an apartment. My wife Faye was never denied care at a hospital. The police never stop me without reason, then pin me to the ground with a knee to my neck (or burn my village as they do in Guatemala), just because of my skin, my gender, or my sexual identity. I enjoy an enshrined right to live my life as I wish. This is the deadly

heritage of *terra nullius*, whose horrors are now being increasingly recognized.

The intrusion of the Canaanite woman into Jesus' world as she broke through the security fence erected around him by his hostile and dismissive disciples is, in my opinion, the most decisive, most critical moment in the life of Jesus and the church—as well as for us. She moved mountains!

Without that nameless Woman, we might not be here.

Just by daring to speak, she presented an identity card deeply scarred by apartheid, which remains deeply relevant to us today.

In Chapter 7, Mark insists that she was a “stranger” from an “Indigenous” people of poor reputation, the survivors of the “conquest of Canaan,” a country “flowing with milk and honey” that was violently seized by conquerors (Joshua). Mark calls her Syrophenician by birth, a people his religious culture deemed to be

thieves, dishonest, and usurers, as well as buyers and sellers of women for prostitution.

Matthew calls her a Canaanite and insists on her religious identity as idolatrous, pagan, and impure like the rest of her people, demonstrating an exclusionary reflex passed on from generation to generation for centuries. This “contamination” was to be avoided at all costs to the glory of Hashem (or Yahweh).

She was “infected” by Baal, goddess of fertility and the harvest in the form of a woman.

Jesus found himself in new territory.

Their meeting was violent, cruel and abusive.

When the woman interrupted to demand her daughter be healed, crying “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David!”, she was pushing back against three walls.

The first was Jesus behind a wall of glacial silence. Disdain, perhaps? Undoubtedly also be-

cause of his religion, which forbade a rabbi from addressing a woman and a woman from talking to a rabbi, or to any man for that matter. Yet she specifically calls him “Son of David.” Was this because of his reputation as a prophet from the countryside or his growing fame as a healer? I would maintain that people living in the margins of exclusion understand their powerful dominators very well. They know how to approach them and the correct way to address them in the interests of survival and of being disarming. South Africans under apartheid, domestic workers whose work permit is in the hands of their employer or spouse, and Indigenous peoples dealing with unreasonable officers from Indian Affairs have all learned from experience and instinct to say “Master” and yet resist.

The woman did not give up, but shouted, “Lord, help me!”

The second wall is more indirectly. When Jesus addresses the disciples, he says: “I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Not for anyone else. Several interpretations attempt to attenuate this exclusion and to excuse Jesus. That is too easy. Instructions to disciples sent on a mission (Matthew 10) leave no doubt: “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Woman, I have not come for you or anyone else living on the margins. Jesus remained adamantly behind this wall.

The third wall appears to be final and fatal. “It is not good to take the children’s [Israel] bread and throw it to the dogs [Gentiles and others].” The word “dogs” is an unqualified insult in many languages. These expressions are violent.

But even when labelled “impure,” the Canaanite woman does not give up. She displays resiliency by fighting to the very end for life—her daughter’s life, her own life, and for the lives of everyone who will one day be in the same position. She searches for the crack, the tiny crack where “the Light gets in”. She finds it in the crumbs that become a banquet of hope for everyone! And then Jesus cracks as she flips him like a pancake.

This is the conversion of Jesus.

“O woman, great is your faith. Let it be to you as YOU desire.”

Were there conditions? Jesus imposed none whatsoever: not purification, not baptism of the converted, not even joining the local church.

For me, this passage displays the faith that moves mountains. It is a passage of liberation, of smugglers who cross every border of race, skin, gender, sexual identity, marginal status, and religion.

In this case, the mountain was Jesus himself, who was moved—and who allowed himself to be moved—by this Canaanite woman. The disciples were moved as well, or else we might not be here.

Nowadays, Jesus and his disciples being moved can still set an example.

As an eighty-year-old White man, it is incumbent upon me to focus less on my own concerns and allow myself to be moved away from my dominant position. My words and actions should also proclaim that every one of us is capable of moving mountains of exclusions, racism and injustice—whether open or hidden—as well as capable of touching the sky, loving and treating everyone as a full-fledged Child of God.

Go forth!



## Faith Reflection

*Adele Halliday*

How Jesus responds to the unnamed woman at the beginning of this story (Matthew 15:21–28 and Mark 7:24–30) is quite different from how he responds to her at the end.

Spend some time reflecting and wondering about this story. Why might Jesus have tried to ignore the woman at first? Why might Jesus have insulted the woman? If you were a bystander to this exchange between Jesus and the woman, how might you have advocated for the woman? What historical and ethnocultural differences between Jesus' and the woman's backgrounds might have been at play in the exchange?

Afterwards, consider the story from the perspectives of different people in the story. Reflect on the perspectives of:

- the unnamed woman
- Jesus
- the disciples
- the woman's daughter
- the crowd/bystanders.

What perspectives might not be present? What might this story mean for you?



## Children's Activity

*Adele Halliday*

Invite children to reflect on their own names. Ask them if they know if their name has a special meaning. Do they have a nickname? Were they named after someone else?

Were they ever called bad names, or names that made them feel sad? The names they were called may have been racist, sexist, or homophobic, or generally mean or hurtful in other ways. When they were called mean names, how did they feel? What did they do and how did they respond? Did they tell an adult such as a parent or teacher? Did they speak directly back to the person and say they did not like being called that name?

Encourage positive ways for children to respond when they are called names. They could choose, for example, to ignore the person calling them names. They could tell an adult. They could speak back to the person who called them names, and say firmly that they do not like being called those names. Ask the children if there are other ways that they could respond to name-calling.

Assure them that any bad names they are called is not who they really are. They are children who are known and loved by God. They are special.

Finally, ask them about any positive and affirming names that they have been called. Who called them that? How did that make them feel? Encourage them to write down some of these words (or younger children could draw a picture about how the words made them feel) so that they can remember the positive words and their feelings.



## Group Commitment

Adele Halliday

Jesus worked for liberation and justice, and challenged institutions for neglecting oppressed and marginalized peoples, all while holding onto some of his own ethnocultural views. In some of our social justice networks, organizations,

or communities, there might also be ways of working towards justice that encompass racism or other forms of exclusion.

Commit to working towards justice in all forms with equity as

the end goal. An extension of this commitment is to regularly engage in critical inquiry to ensure that your work of justice is not promoting racism and other inequities.



## Advocacy

Adele Halliday

In the story of the Canaanite or Syrophenian woman, who was doing advocacy?

In many ways, the unnamed woman had to strongly advocate for herself and her own needs. She did not shy away from doing self-advocacy.

Similarly, there are times when it is the people who live with the reality of racial trauma and the detrimental effects of racial injustice who are the most engaged in advocating for racial change. There are times when Indigenous and racialized people might be or feel alone in advocating for racial justice.

Of course, self-advocacy is important, and it does have a place—it is one way to name one's own needs and name what justice would look like for people who have been oppressed and excluded on the basis of identity.

Sometimes, though, some among us might act like the disciples. The disciples wanted to send the woman away from Jesus who could heal and liberate her. The denial, rejection and erasure of the woman were outrightly oppressive actions by the disciples. What else could the disciples have done that did not exhibit oppression? In a sense, the disciples failed to advocate for the woman.

Advocacy for racial justice can involve and engage all of us.

- How might you be in solidarity with people who are advocating for racial justice?
- When might you need to be your own advocate to name what you need?
- Are there times or spaces when your way or doing advocacy or responding to advocacy might need to change in response to persistent voices?



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