

Why are we out here?

There's enough reason not to be...the threat of rain, a missing choir, all the extra work of setting up the street, the bothersome inconvenience of it all.

So, why are we out here?

Please don't all raise your hands at once.

Really, why are we out here?

*(Await responses; dialogue)*

One ironic reason we are out here is that the sanctuary is dangerous.

It is terribly foreboding and fearful for those who are visitors, who are not familiar or comfortable with it.

The beautiful architecture is imposing, and it reinforces what is so daunting about religion: the fearsome glory of a distant God, the pretensions of hypocrites who fancy themselves in God's inner circle, the constant threat of judgment and rejection.

We may like to argue that we're not like that here, but every church says that and means it, and even if and when that is true--which is not all of the time--that is not obvious, available information to the traumatized, fragile soul with a lump in the throat at the bottom of the staircase leading up to the tall, heavy doors.

Walking in there takes significant courage or desperation, or what Jesus might call "great faith." But the sanctuary is not only dangerous for outsiders; it is dangerous in there for insiders, too.

Members feel right at home in there, and home is usually where we are at our sloppiest.

It is comfortable, and comfortable is bad for growth.

The joy of being comfortable is why I remain single and overweight, which I know bothers some of you, and it is also why our long vision discernment process rendered so little, because we realized how much we like our status quo and communal complacency, which you know sometimes bothers me.

The sanctuary is convenient, familiar, warm and dry, an environment that we can control, which can subtly without our realizing it feed our addictions to comfort and convenience and reinforce our deadly illusion that we are fully in control, or can be, or should be.

Worshiping outside scrambles all that, leaves us exposed, makes us not just think in our heads but feel in our bones that life is dynamic and we are not in charge.

It has the potential to turn us inside out, which is what today's gospel reading is all about.

When Jesus the Jew is resisting the nameless Canaanite woman, he assumes that dogs live outside the house, because that is standard Jewish practice.

Unlike Canaanite culture with its indoor pets, only people live inside, while dogs live outside.

Jesus was as certain as a comfortable church member that his mission was an inside job, to the house of Israel, a beloved house in disrepair that required so much attention that it would be morally wrong to siphon off and waste precious resources of time and energy and power on those outside of it.

Jesus himself needs to step outside his own sanctuary to see God's grace in a new and deeper way.

There can be no better teacher than this woman with the demon possessed daughter; there is no one more clear and persistent than the mother of a suffering child.

Indeed, Jesus has been sent precisely because God is the mother of the suffering children of Israel, so when he finally steps outside of his assumptions and looks her in the eye, what he thought was D-O-G is really a mirror reflection of G-O-D.

And as much as Jesus heals her daughter, this mother's great faith heals Jesus.  
He needs this unwelcome gift right now.

He has been traveling with a band of Jewish men who struggle to achieve her clarity, her hunger for God's grace, her trust, her passion, her tenacious love.

He has been denouncing the religious insiders, the prancing priests and militant altar guild who are concerned about threats from the outside...unclean hands, unwashed vessels, unheeded protocol, unfollowed rules.

He tells them that the real threat is internal, not external; that what comes out of their backside doesn't smell nearly as bad as what comes out of their mouth...because food and germs aren't nearly as toxic as that smorgasbord of treachery that is the human heart.

Now, his own wise words come back to bite him, and in doing so, to heal him.

Jesus is now learning exactly what he was trying to teach.

And he would have never seen it so clearly if he had not gone to Tyre and Sidon...that is, outside of Israel, outside the house, outside among the dogs.

This whole episode makes some of us insiders uncomfortable, of course, because it portrays only too clearly the humanity of Jesus.

In this story, not only is Jesus selfish and rude, but he changes his mind and learns something he didn't fully realize before.

He comes off looking no better than the rest of us, and we want and maybe even need Jesus to be better than the rest of us.

We take comfort in the distinction, in the tradition that Jesus is perfect because we assume somebody has to be, because we've built a whole daunting architecture of assumptions about what God wants and expects, and if Jesus isn't perfect, then somehow we're all screwed, because we assume that God must value standards more than people.

Jesus' fulfillment of our standards of perfection is one of many beloved distinctions we cherish to maintain a sense of meaning and order.

We want a sanctuary, holy space separate from other space.

We want requirements for Communion, because how is it special if just anyone can have it?

We want an inside distinct from the outside, divine distinct from human, members distinct from non-members, Canaanites distinct from Jews, dogs distinct from children.

It is natural, and often appropriate, and also dangerous.

It is a path to arrogance, judgment and cruelty.

It leads us to presumption and to an idolatrous projection upon God the confining assumptions and insecurities that imprison us.

But God is liberating us.

God keeps working to save us from the stale poison inside our hearts and minds and souls.

God pushes us out into the street to worship, to meet our neighbors, to engage a world with great needs and great faith.

God sends us two vendors, one from Destination Church and another from an Islamic center, who sit at our street festival to give our guests a different story about God than we will.

They are for us gifts from God to keep us honest; be sure to visit them and talk to them today.

Be even more sure, as Jesus finally did with the Canaanite woman, to listen to them...you may well learn something wonderfully new or newly wonderful about the God you already know.

God sings to us in the poetry of the prophet and in the narrative of the gospel writer about the great faith of foreigners and the shortcomings of the membership.

God listens to us and reserves the right to change God's attitude and mind based on what we say, to be moved by our impassioned pleas for those we love.

And God sends us Jesus, blurring the lines between human and divine, between insider and outsider, even between dead and alive, a powerful man with the courage to listen to a strong woman, a Jew with the courage to listen to a Canaanite, a God with the courage to be fully human, so that there is even hope that a dog like me--who has no business being saved or receiving God's grace or claiming any hope at all because I'm not Jewish--even a foreign dog like me can feast as a cherished child on the crumbs at Christ's table.

And so can you, whoever you are...insider or outsider, visitor or member, Jew or Gentile, Christian or not, because God's house will be *a house of prayer for all peoples*, and that means we have to come outside--outside our sanctuary, and outside our tidy worldview--because God wants to welcome and heal and nourish and lavish love upon everyone, beyond us and including us, and that means that our house is too small.