Apologies to Elton John and Bernie Taupin who claimed that *Sorry seems to be the hardest word*. I think the hardest word for humans might be AND.¹

Maybe it’s an evolutionary survival instinct that makes us think it’s us OR them rather than us AND them. But wherever it comes from, the church has to decide whether AND or OR is going to be our defining conjunction.

Our Gospel text today starts out with the expected OR and gets to the unexpected AND. When I say unexpected, I would argue that it’s a veritable miracle that it happens at all—a miracle of inclusion.

This is the final of three sermons from Matthew’s Gospel where we have looked at miracles of Jesus. The first was physical, feeding the 5,000—the miracle of abundance. The second was psychological, walking on water—the miracle of faith. The third is social, healing the Canaanite woman’s demonically-affected daughter—the miracle of inclusion.

Did you hear the subtext of my description of this miracle? CANAANITE, first. A Canaanite was an indigenous person to that region whose religion we might describe as pagan. When the children of Israel entered the Promised Land, they didn’t find it empty. Various groups of Gentiles occupied the land, all of them grouped under the term Canaanites. They were conquered and subdued by the arriving Israelites who took possession of the land. If this story sounds familiar, you might be hearing cries of Palestinians today in Israel or Native Americans in our own country.

She is a Canaanite WOMAN. More on that in a moment, but for now let’s remember that for Jews in that time, women had no legal standing apart from their fathers or husbands nor did they have religious authority in the community.

¹ Thanks to Diana Butler Bass for this notion. [https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/the-importance-of-and](https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/the-importance-of-and)
Finally, the Canaanite woman’s daughter is DEMON-POSSESSED. Now, for our purposes, let’s say that whatever her modern diagnosis—whether emotional or mental illness of some sort, or actual demon possession, the point is that she is tormented within, unable to control her thoughts or feelings. This was attributable in her day to demonic powers that had taken possession of her. The only treatment then was to separate a young woman like that from the community. Keep evil away.

There can hardly be a more comprehensive example of OR that gets to AND than this story. But the biggest surprise might be that it even takes this encounter to get Jesus from OR to AND. Though he was the Son of God, the Bible says, Jesus had to learn obedience through suffering (Heb. 5:8). This obedience he learned involved discerning the direction of God’s will against prevailing understandings of it—even his own. Defining faithfulness by engagement rather than separation is a key shift God brings about in Jesus and through Jesus.

Matthew wrote his Gospel for the church in Antioch, Syria, more than a half century after Jesus’ death and resurrection. You might say that the entire Gospel is written to show the way to this church of how to move from OR to AND. The church in Antioch was founded by Jewish believers in Jesus, but its location and missionary efforts brought many Gentiles into the fold. That ancient tension had to work itself out if the church were to be culture-making rather than culture-mirroring. Matthew shows us that church unity-in-diversity is rooted in Jesus’ own experience. His example should guide them as they learn to open their arms to people that they used to stiff-arm instead.

And yet, we are still pushing people away in the church. How can we read passages like this one and then defend our right to discriminate against all kinds of people—Black, Indigenous and other People of Color, immigrants and asylum seekers, poor people, gay and transgender persons, people of other religions? How can this be?

from 1968. *I will flatly say that the bulk of this country's white population impresses me, and has so impressed me for a very long time, as being beyond any conceivable hope of moral rehabilitation. They have been white, if I may so put it, too long...*² What an indictment!

Jones goes on to chronicle what that means. The most damning part of the book is the way the Christian church in America developed and defended a theology of white supremacy. This remains embedded in our beliefs and practices even now, long after many have rejected the overt racism of the Klan. Jones thinks this theology is rooted in the twin paradox of protection and purity. As long as we can keep our churches free from those who would pollute our purity, we will be blessed. But once that becomes your mission, instead of extending the profligate grace of God to others who seem different from you in a myriad of ways, you get trapped in a cramped room that leaves no place even for God.

The Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, once talked about how hard it is to live up to and into our true identity as Christians. He noted that Paul said that the “old man of Sin” must die in baptism in order that the “new man of Righteousness” may be born. Luther said that instead of drowning in the waters of baptism, the old man turns out to be quite the swimmer.

In other words, we’re never finished in this work of becoming what God is calling us to become—both individually and as a church. So, let’s see how it happened for Jesus.

Jesus has just finished talking to the Pharisees, telling them that it’s not external things or people that defile them but things internal. All sin comes from the heart and moves outward. Then he leaves for retreat in the region of Tyre and Sidon, near the Mediterranean Sea, which was heavy Gentile country. It’s almost as if he’d had all he could handle of debates with his own people and figured he could get some peace among the Gentiles. But there’s nowhere to run anywhere on the planet to be free of God’s roaming spirit.

A Canaanite woman comes out shouting at Jesus: *Have mercy on

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² (Simon & Schuster, 2020), frontispiece.
me, Lord, Son of David: my
daughter is tormented by a
demon. The gauntlet is laid. A
woman of another faith
identifies him rightly, even if she
doesn't know fully what she
means. As one commentator
puts it: “Her address soars up to
heaven; her request goes down
to hell. In one great cry, the
woman has pitted the Davidite
against the demons.”

What will Jesus do?

First, nothing. He doesn’t answer
right away. He is silent in the
face of her desperate pleading.
This can seem cruel on the
surface, but there’s a difference
between the silence of
indifference and the pause of
contemplation. Jesus isn’t deaf to
the woman; he is listening first.
He is taking in what is
happening. Turns out, he is
allowing her to move him, to
make him think, or rather
rethink his mission.

If only the church could learn to
listen to the cries of the
oppressed and the hurting
before talking. If only we would
consider the questions of the
suffering world before offering
answers. Then maybe we
ourselves would be changed.
Maybe we would become part of
the solution instead of being
complicit with the problem.

Well, the disciples want to send
her away. Don’t we always? I
mean, isn’t it easier to ignore or
silence a loud, suffering person
who is disturbing our peace
instead of imagining that maybe
God is trying to get our attention
through her?

Then Jesus engages her. It’s
almost like he’s talking to
himself, echoing his previous
understanding about his
mission. *I was sent only to the
lost sheep of the house of Israel.*
And if that had settled it once
and for all, you and I wouldn’t be
here today. The church would
have been only a sect of Judaism.

The woman kneels before him
and begs, *Lord, help me.* He
replies, *It isn’t fair to take the
children’s food and throw it to the
dogs.* Sound like Jesus to you? If
it makes it easier to take, you
should know that he uses the
word that means “house dogs,”
not the normal one for Gentiles
which meant “wild dogs.”
Progress, but not much. The

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3 Frederick Dale Brunner, *Matthew, A
Commentary, Volume 2, The Churchbook,
woman persists. *Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.*

There it is. Check and checkmate. She’s got him. Jesus concedes the point, sees her faith and declares her daughter healed. Boom.

Let’s review. Jesus is supposed to be a know-it-all, don’t you know?! But he doesn’t know it all and he knows he doesn’t know it all. He allows himself to be acted upon and changed by this woman who is in every way possible “other” to him. He feels what is happening first, and he feels it so deeply that it changes the way he thinks and acts. And the consequence is a miracle of inclusion.

You see, it’s not just that the woman’s daughter is healed of her mental illness or demon possession. It’s that all the things that had been excuses to separate and dismiss people are now gone. No theology of protection and purity will fly once Jesus sends that girl’s demon packing.

The most discouraging finding in Robby Jones’s work with the Public Religion Research Institute is the strong statistical correlation he found between attitudes of racial prejudice and church attendance. It seems the more people go to church, the more likely they are to be OR people instead of AND people.

But if the church has been part of the problem of American othering and excluding, it can become part of the solution by being converted. Jesus’ miracle of inclusion can become ours, too. We ourselves can become signs of the new creation. Considering the long history of the church’s prejudices, it won’t happen easily. But that’s why we call what Jesus does … miracles. Amen.