Jesus… was a man… in whom the fullness of God came to dwell. In him is the word who was there in the beginning… the Logos… the wisdom… the architect of creation… Lord of all. But, Jesus was also a man. He experienced all that is a part of being a human man. And part of being a man is being wrong. Men are from Venus. Men don’t stop for directions. Men get things wrong. But, good men, really good men recognize when they are wrong and submit to the miracle of changing their mind. Jesus was a good man. And what we see here is Jesus being opened up to a larger perspective of his own mission in this encounter with the Canaanite woman. And if we think about it, it makes sense. Of course a relational God — a holy Three-in-one — would use encounter with others to change us. And if this is the case, of course, this would happen to Jesus too.

A few years ago when Rick McClatchy preached here at Woodland he asked the question, “What does it feel like to be wrong?” And then he told the story about how one time when he was driving through this old small town in Oklahoma, when he was CBF field coordinator there. He drove down main street of this small town in Oklahoma and he was amazed at how friendly everyone was. Everyone he passed waved at him. Rick grew up in a small town so he knew that wasn’t that different from life in other small towns. So he just waved back and kept right on driving through this town with no traffic. Then he saw one man on the sidewalk who was frantically waving his arms. And he noticed up ahead that there were cars heading toward him in both lanes of this 2 lane street. That’s when he realized he was on a one-way street. “What does it feel like to be wrong?” When he was driving the wrong way, Rick said, “It felt like I was getting this great reception.” What does it feel like to be wrong? “It feels like being right.” Now, after being corrected he was embarrassed and a little ashamed. But, at least he didn’t have a head on collision.

As children we picture Jesus like our fathers— an all knowing, all
powerful superhero who glides above the fray. Perfect in power, knowledge and control. This is what we want from God, but there is more to God than this. And if we believe that Jesus was fully man as the church has proclaimed for two thousand years then we are saying that Jesus experienced what men experience, indeed what men and women experience — an uncertain road ahead, a struggle to find vocation, and wonder at God’s presence. And I submit to you today, that believing that Jesus learns something here is not something that should shake our faith, but strengthen our resolve. This is good news. This is good news that God really did become human. That God submitted God’s self fully to the struggles and inherent biases of temporal life. Believing that Jesus floated above the fray — floating through life always having everything figured out perfectly — this is not incarnation. Yes, there are many times, especially in the gospel of John, where it does seem that Jesus knows exactly what will happen at every moment of his life. But, there is another side to the story. There are other moments in the gospels that espouse a more human side. And this human side doesn’t mean that Jesus sinned by being wrong. It means that he was human. That he was subject to the process of discovery and growth as all of us are. And that, I believe, is good news for us today. We don’t have to have it all figured out. If we think we have it all figured out then it is likely we are more like the Pharisees than we are like Jesus. The pharisees guarded the boundaries and taught all of Israel to guard them because we can be defiled by what goes in the body, right? We can be defiled by who comes into the assembly, right? If we let this person in, then it’s a slippery slope we will have to let everybody in. Where’s the line? If we affirm the faith of this disruptive Canaanite woman by granting her request what’s next, it’s a slippery slope?

At CBF General Assembly this year we celebrated the 25th anniversary of the Cooperative Baptist movement. Author Brian McClaren spoke one night and he congratulated CBF on 25 years and he offered a few challenges to us, “Realize that you didn’t start at the top of a slippery slope back in 1991. Because I know that’s what your critics were telling you… that’s bad framing… it’s not the truth. Western Christianity slid way, way down long before that.” When
you left the Southern baptists over issues of church autonomy and the ordination of women. Baptists weren’t so great in 1991 or 1964 when baptists were the hold outs protecting Jim Crow laws and segregation. Or back to 1845 when the Southern Baptist Convention formed around the defense of slavery. Sliding down a slippery slope shouldn’t be a problem; if we are honest, we have room for improvement.

There’s always the worry about what’s next. The slippery slope fallacy suggests that if we allow A to happen, then Z will eventually happen too, therefore A should not happen. But, there’s a slippery slope to the slippery slope. That is that if we never do anything, nothing ever happens and things get worse. I.E. we do not do A and eventually the Z that comes to us is far worse. The slippery slope is a logical fallacy that avoids engaging with the issue at hand, and instead shifts attention to extreme hypotheticals. An example of this would be, “If you ordain women as ministers, then you start going against what the bible says next thing you know you’re not even a bible believing Christian anymore. It’s a slippery slope.”

Unsubstantiated claims and fear = slippery slope.

Or how about this one from Matthew 15, "Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” If they disavow part of the law what keeps them from dissolving themselves of the whole thing? For now they don’t wash their hands before they eat, next thing you know they’ll be eating pork chops like those dogs, the Canaanites. Jesus calls them hypocrites as he calls the crowd to him and says, “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person— it’s what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” The disciples, like any good deacon, take the preacher aside and say, “You know you said too much, right?” And they question him— what are you talking about? Jesus explains. What you say and do matters. When they match up we call that integrity. When our words and actions don’t match up then people around us lose faith in us.

Jesus goes from there to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Jesus is off duty; he’s passing through gentile territory most likely heading
to some Jewish villages in the area. As he is going a woman, a Canaanite woman with a demonic daughter, comes out to find him.

A few weeks ago I was at our neighborhood pool with family and some friends. We were off away from the pool under the trees eating dinner at a picnic table when I heard the panic shouting. I looked up and saw a mother in full panic—holding one baby and reaching for a toddler in the water who had flipped over in his floaty and was hanging head down in the water. There was an adult three steps away in the water who quickly picked the child up and gave him to the mother. He was fine. He wasn’t drowning. The whole episode probably didn’t last more than 6 seconds. But, the moment of panic, the terror of the mother was an eternity. It’s the kind of moment that makes your heart stop, you lose your breath. Everything stops.

That’s the kind of panic we are talking about here. That’s the kind of desperation we are talking about. This woman came out from her village, she came out from her people and began shouting in Jesus direction. She knows that, somehow, this is the one who can do something. This is the one who can lift her child up from drowning in this evil. Yet, Jesus ignores her.

I wonder about his internal struggle. He has just pushed the boundaries with the pharisees, and his own disciples are worried about what that means. Maybe he thinks he needs to “play by the rules,” stick to the script a bit more, do what the common rabbi would do. So he ignores her. But, the woman persists. She begins shouting at the disciples, and they beg him to send her away. He complies, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” “But, Lord, help me.” “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Jesus is trying to be stern here. He articulates the underlying prejudice of his people.

Jews of this day commonly referred to gentiles as dogs. Christian interpreters for centuries have sought to smooth away the abrasive edges of this scene. Some will tell you that the Greek word for dogs, used here, is actually the word for a particular kind of dog – a small house dog, or a puppy, if you will. So, Jesus is actually using a term of endearment for the woman and her daughter, some say. The
attempts to domesticate extend even to Christian art, such as the Baroque era portrayal of Christ and the woman, by Sebastiano Ricci. A smiling, fair-haired Jesus gazes at the woman, who holds an adorable little spotted dog – something like the Pokey Little Puppy of Golden Book fame. And Jesus seems to change his mind because the puppy is so darn cute! But, as easy as that would be, he’s not talking about the clumsy little Labradors we see on Purina commercials. Calling the woman a dog would sound about the same as if it were shouted in a high school hallway today.

Yet, this woman turns Jesus’ words on its end saying, “Yes and even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” And Jesus is in awe. He heals her daughter. Jesus had just told his disciples that it’s not what goes in the mouth that makes you holy but what comes out of your mouth. What comes out of this woman’s mouth is faith. It’s faith that brings her to Jesus. It’s faith that makes her holy. It’s faith which comes out of her. It’s that faith which brings her out and into God’s kingdom.

But, what happens now? Is God’s mercy and salvation open to the Canaanites? These are dangerous people. These are people who do bad things. These are people who don’t know to wash their hands before they eat. What are we supposed to do when they show up for worship? What do we tell our kids? Jesus is unconcerned with the implications of this mercy; he’s not concerned with the slippery slope of offering grace. What he is concerned with is discerning God’s way forward. And what he finds here is that faith is spilling out beyond Israel. The vulnerable, desperate, boundary-crossing woman not only secures healing for her daughter, she also challenges the scope of Jesus’ ministry.

We tend to put ourselves in the disciples’ shoes as we read the gospels. We see ourselves as carrying on their legacy—we are their descendants, the disciples of today. But, maybe it would be more true to say for all of us gentiles, that we are this Canaanite woman. By grace we are included in the promises fulfilled to Israel in Jesus. We are foreigners adopted into the family. In days like these were anti-semitism is on the rise, where black churches are being targeted and the people in synagogues live
in fear of being targeted next we gentiles should remember our place in the story. In Jesus’ day, they believed true faith was not possible outside Israel. But, faith isn't inherited. Faith doesn't come from a law or code. It comes from overhearing Jesus and going out to meet him. It comes by accepting those who come, recognizing faith when we see it and remembering that the God who led us thus far has promised to be with us always. Faith makes its own way forward. And where faith is, there is enough. We worry, if there is mercy for the Canaanite, will there be enough for me? And as if to answer that question Matthew ends this chapter by telling the story of Jesus once again feeding a multitude. He feeds a crowd of over 4,000 with seven loaves and a few small fish. Because with God and faith there will be enough.

Jesus was a man. And he acts according to a limited view of his mission to that point, and the mother responds according to a desperate need outside of that limited view. And Jesus calls it faith. And as he does so the scope of his mission broadens. So much so that this great cursing foreshadows the great commission. Jesus could not have recognized this moment of ordinary grace without prayer. We see over and over again in Matthew that Jesus goes off by himself to pray. It’s these moments of prayer that provide and nourish him in times of discernment and even conflict. This is a pivotal moment for Jesus. And he recognizes the Spirit’s direction. He changes his mind. His view is broaden and he recognizes the bias of his own upbringing. He begins to discern that Israel is chosen for the sake of inclusion rather than exclusion. Israelite supremacy is something to be put aside— because they were blessed to be a blessing— not simply to be blessed to boast about it.

We worry that this story makes Jesus look bad. I don’t think that’s the point; he is still the sinless savior. But, what happens here is miraculous— a man changing his mind. A man recognizing the limitation of his view and finding himself learning something from a Canaanite woman with a demonic daughter. He is a divine example in human form. Even the Christ can change his mind. There is hope for us still.
The gospel of this moment reminds us that people can change. There are good Canaanites. People we have labeled beyond redemption can change. And now that this woman has found faith we might as well slide down the slippery slope and open up the doors of the church to all who show signs of faith like her. All who come shouting the name Jesus seeking the same mercy, the same salvation, the same God that we have known in him. The One who gathered us here and calls us out. Any of us and any of them can change. Even us. Perhaps if Jesus can admit his own bias and make amends then we might see how we too have been shaped by our own prejudices, our own systems of thought, by privilege, by demonic racism that cripples our children, and begin to offer a little more grace to those on the margins. We are descendants of that Canaanite woman— once marginalized but by grace included.

John Lewis was the head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee at age 24 during the Civil Rights movement. Back in the day, Lewis and a friend were in a bus station when four young white men came in, beat them with baseball bats, and left them lying in a pool of their own blood. When their assailants left, Lewis and his friend found shelter, tended their wounds, and went on with their nonviolent work. Lewis still bears the scars of the beatings he took during those years.

Lewis is now a congressman. And a few years ago, he was in his Capitol Hill office when a white man about his age walked in and said, “I’m one of the men who assaulted you in that bus station. I’ve come to seek your forgiveness. Will you forgive me?” Speaking simply and sparely, Lewis said, “I stood. We embraced. We wept. I forgave him. Then we sat and talked.” As the bus sped on through that once-murderous countryside, Lewis leaned back and gazed out the window. Then he said, very softly, “People can change… People can change…”

If Jesus can change his mind about mercy, about people, about the scope of his vision, about how big God is— then maybe there’s hope for us too— To follow him… in compassion, in mercy, in grace and not worry about the implications. Because faith is out there, beyond the walls of this
church spilling over this city. Who knows where this might lead? But, when you see it don’t be surprised.