“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” It’s a statement with which it is hard to argue. No sensible parent would take food that was intended for the children of the house and use it to feed the dogs. Perfectly sensible.

It would ne nice if it were just that easy, but it isn’t. In this case, as in most cases, context means everything. The person who spoke the words was Jesus. The person to whom he spoke them was a Canaanite woman – a woman outside the circle of the Hebrews – a descendant of Noah’s son, Ham. And the reason for the statement? The woman had come to Jesus, seeking healing for her daughter. To her heart-wrenching request, Jesus responds, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Did Jesus just call this woman a dog? Did Jesus just say that to give this woman from beyond the circle of Israel what she seeks would be akin to throwing the children’s food to the dogs? Is Jesus telling this distraught woman, in so many words, to shove off?

In a word, yes. That is exactly what he is telling her.

It simply seems so unlike Jesus to speak this way – to exhibit an attitude of “get away from me.” We expect Jesus to be sensitive. We expect Jesus to be, at minimum, sympathetic – if not empathetic. We expect Jesus to be nice to everyone – caring to everyone – compassionate to everyone. But he calls this woman a dog and calling a woman a female dog had the same tone then as if it were shouted in a high school hallway today.

So, what is going on here? Why is this story being passed down to us in the pages of scripture? Why does Jesus seem so unlike the Jesus we are accustomed to meeting in the Bible?
At work in this story is one word: tradition. If you were lucky enough to see this summer’s production of “Fiddler on the Roof,” you’ll remember that Tevye tells us something about tradition. “Because of our traditions, we have kept our balance for many, many years. Here in Anatevka, we have traditions for everything: how to eat, how to sleep, how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered, and always wear a little prayer-shawl. This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, how did this tradition start? I’ll tell you. I don’t know. But it’s a tradition. And because of our traditions, every one of us knows who he is, and what God expects him to do.”

When our traditions are at their very best, they remind us of who we are and what God expects us to do. When our traditions are what they should be, they draw us closer to each other and to God. When our traditions are noble and honorable and wholesome they better our lives and the way we live them. But when our traditions are misguided, they can be destructive and devastating. When our traditions build walls between people, when they cast one group as virtuous and another as depraved, when our traditions exalt one group while damning another, then our traditions become toxic and poisonous – and even deadly.

How would the people for whom Matthew’s gospel was written have heard this story? We don’t hear it, some 2,000 years later, but there’s a lot going on in this story. The Canaanites were the people who were living in the Promised Land when the Israelites found their way to that land. There was ancient animosity between Canaanites and Israelites. There were differences of ethnicity, heritage, and religion between Canaanites and Israelites. And let us not forget that the role of a woman in that ancient culture was not one that embraced her speaking in public. Women were expected to be reserved and preferably silent in public. But she is there, shouting at Jesus, the gospel tells us. She is violating the social norms of her day. Such outbursts do not deserve a response, and, perhaps, that is why Jesus begins by ignoring her. And then, the Canaanite woman starts talking about demons. Have you ever had someone talk to you about demons? It’s a little beyond our Presbyterian proclivities. This past week, the suicide of Robin Williams was wrongly attributed to his “demons.” People with illness – physical, mental, or spiritual – do not have demons – they have diseases. The Canaanite woman’s daughter had some kind of disease and she came to Jesus on behalf of her daughter, seeking healing and wholeness.

The woman is breaking with tradition – with what was considered “normal” and “acceptable.” The Canaanite woman is throwing away all of the expected protocol. Why? Because her daughter is sick and I dare you to find me a parent – mother or father – who will not exhaust every possibility to see their child made well and whole.
Jesus’ words and actions reflect the attitudes of his day – whether they were his attitudes or a calculated ploy by the gospel of Matthew to sucker in the reader so that what happens next hits with power. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Undeterred, the Canaanite woman says, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.”

This woman is not about to let something as feeble as a bad tradition get in the way of her daughter’s wellness. She is not willing to let tradition deny her and her daughter a place in the kingdom of God’s love and wholeness. Ethnicity, heritage, religion, gender, demons – none of it will get in the way of her receiving the fullness that Jesus brings. She will break through barriers, cast aside custom, and trample under foot tradition in order to see her daughter made well. And even Jesus won’t get in her way.

“I may be a dog, Jesus, but even the dogs get the scraps – the left-overs – the crumbs that fall from the table. And if that is enough to make my daughter well, then it will be enough.” And that certainty – that conviction – that confidence made enough of an impression on Jesus that he extolled the woman’s faith and healed the woman’s daughter.

I don’t know how Jesus really felt about the woman. I don’t know if he was as prejudiced as his traditions dictated he be, or whether he was putting on an act. I don’t know and if someone tells you that they do, be careful. I don’t know exactly what was in Jesus’ heart and mind.

But, by the end of Matthew’s gospel, we all know what Jesus thought and commissioned all of us to do. “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations.” Go, and share the love of God with everyone – regardless of whether they are Jew or Gentile. Go, expand the borders of God’s kingdom of love and acceptance.

And what might the story mean for us today? It might mean a lot of things, but let’s just wrestle with one or two.

Let’s begin by thinking about what this lesson might mean as we – the church – and we, as First Presbyterian Church, in particular – share the good news of God’s love in Jesus. We know that the love of God is for all people and that we don’t have the right to withhold God’s acceptance and welcome from anyone. There was a time, which was long before us, when in some Presbyterian churches, African-American people were not welcome. There was a time, which was long before us, when women were permitted to be a part of the church, but were not allowed any position of leadership beyond the church kitchen and the Sunday School room. There was a time, within 20 years, when the church did not welcome God’s gay and lesbian children and their gifts for ministry.

The question is: who are we keeping out now? Who is it that we are treating “like dogs” to borrow the phrase from Jesus? Who are we not yet ready to see as God’s children and welcome them as we ourselves were welcomed? Who are they?
And the second question is this: what traditions are we observing and continuing that might deserve to be let go? The story seems to be telling us that some of the traditions Jesus was raised to observe were jettisoned as he embraced the fullness of his mission. What if that were our story, too? What if we are called to cast aside whatever traditions we observe that limit the love of God and block the expansion of God’s realm of love and justice? What traditions and customs in the church no longer make any sense if we are to share the love of God that is broad and deep and wide?

Walter Bruggeman writes, “Jesus in his solidarity with the marginal ones is moved to compassion. Compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism, for it announces that the hurt is to be taken seriously, that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal and natural but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition for humanness.”

Who are the hurting – the disillusioned – the forgotten? Who are the hungry – the disenfranchised – the marginalized? Who are those who are locked in poverty – who cannot get the education they need – those whom our laws and legislations seem to hold down instead of lift up and empower? It is for these that Jesus came and it is to these that Jesus calls to go.

Moving from prejudice to love is not an easy journey. Jesus knew that. And still it is a journey he made and calls us to make. We may not live in Ferguson, Missouri, but we can begin to understand the horrific events of this week if we think about ancient customs and practices. We may not be able to find Iraq on a map, but we know that people being lined up and executed for what they believe and how they practice their faith is wrong. We may not comprehend all the nuances of the conflict between Arabs and Israelis. We may not understand why anyone would hate and practice extreme prejudice toward another, but that does not excuse us from sharing our witness to Jesus Christ and the way of love, justice, and peace.

To those the world treats as dogs, Jesus give us this commission: “feed the dogs.” And let us offer them more than crumbs. Let us offer them life and joy. For now and evermore. Amen.

1. Walter Bruggeman, Embracing the Prophets