If I was going to turn today’s gospel reading into a movie I would call it “Jesus, Uncut”. Matthew gives us rare footage of Jesus caught in a “teachable moment”. You know what I mean by a “teachable moment”? An encounter in which, if we’re attentive and open enough, we can learn something about the world, about ourselves, about God. Encounters when the human, humble, and holy meet.

Jesus has been rubbing elbows with many people with all sorts of needs. The hungry needing to be fed. The sick needing healing, and restored health. The ones closest to him, his disciples needing reassurance that the God in whom they have put their faith can be trusted, even in the midst of sudden, threatening storms.

Jesus leaves Gennesaret in the area of Galilee with the disciples and travels north in Syrian territory, to the towns of Tyre and Sidon. There he is approached by a “Canaanite” woman. That term would not have been used in Jesus’ day, but Matthew wants to give a clear picture of this woman who approaches Jesus. Matthew stirs up the memory of a once “real and present danger” early in Jewish history. Canaanites had been fierce enemies of Israel when the nation was forming. So not only is this stranger approaching Jesus a Gentile, and a woman, she is one of “them”, a descendant of an old Jewish nemesis. An unwelcome “other”.

Jesus did not notice her, and even though she was shouting at him, he ignored her. Didn’t respond at all. The disciples, as they had done with that hungry crowd of 5000 people, tell Jesus to send her away. Her shouting is annoying them; and frankly, it’s becoming a little embarrassing. Of course the woman wants something. Was there ever a time people didn’t want something from him?

Jesus replies to the disciples who are urging him to send her away, and the woman overhears him say: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” My mission has clear parameters. I have come only for the Jewish people. This woman is outside the lines drawn by tradition, geography, and religion.

The woman has been loud and assertive shouting from a distance, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon”. She refuses to be deterred by Jesus’ explanation of some exclusionary line he must draw. So nevertheless, she persists. She will not be excluded. She has a universal agenda - one human being asking help from another human being. And she is not asking help for herself. She is a mother asking on behalf of her tormented child. She approaches again, coming right up to kneel in front of Jesus. “Lord, help me”.
I can imagine that his defensiveness may start to crack a bit at this point. Perhaps his reply is more considered, more tentative, though his words are still dismissive of the woman. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Here again is drawn the line of exclusion, when it seems that Jesus refers to her as a “dog”.

Silence follows. Then quietly, with great dignity and calmness, and no hint of anger she replies to him, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

This is a teachable moment. The woman disarms Jesus into acting differently than he at first had intended. This Syrian woman confronts and challenges this Jewish man to grow, to become more than he yet knows himself to be. “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed.

Scripture commentator John Shea notes: “Great faith is the persistent creativity to bring about the good. Great faith belongs to all of us when we remind each other of the deeper truth of who we are, and compassion flows from us into situations where it is deeply needed.”


Jesus is moved and changed by this woman. His vision is expanded ever wider to see the abundance of God’s grace, as God speaks through this woman searching for mercy in a demon-ridden world. Little things like ethnic difference, patriarchal tradition, and even history of hatred between their peoples will not stand in her way.

The outsider, the Canaanite woman helps Jesus to stretch beyond all lines, limits, and exclusions to become more fully the man God calls him to be – the Lord of love and justice who pushes beyond human made boundaries to share God’s all-encompassing love. Beyond categories that divide people into us and them, deserving and undeserving. Jesus is learning, being shaped into the savior for the life of the world, for all peoples.

Cardinal John Henry Newman said, “To live is to change, and to change often is to become more perfect”. For the past five months we’ve all been trying to adapt to changes we have had little to no control over. We may be weary of hearing about change. Worn out trying to cope with change. Living on edge, wondering what is going to change next. So we may not welcome this story of Jesus changing his mind and action through unexpected human encounter. But if we take the gospel to heart, here is what we are invited to consider: How willing are we to listen to the voices of those different from us, and through our listening, be open to the change their stories might call forth from us?
The “other” or “outsider” voice may be that of a child or teenager. A single parent. A person of a different race or ethnicity. A person who is serving or has served time in prison. A person differently-abled. A person born in another country. A person of another religion, or different political persuasion than our own.

The spirituality group that meets on Thursdays is now reading and studying together a book titled, “White Fragility”. The book is written by a white woman, Robin DiAngelo who carefully and thoroughly unpacks why it is so difficult for white people to talk openly about racism, white privilege and white supremacy. I think it’s fair to say that the book is an eye-opener for all of us. We’re discovering how much we take for granted as white people. How naturally we assume that how we experience the world is how everyone else experiences it. One of the challenges in reading this book is in opening our minds so that we might begin to change our behavior.

I believe this is what happened for Jesus in his brief encounter with the Canaanite woman. Her words and determination made him stop and think about who he was in relationship to her, and who God was calling him to be.

The edges of our comfort zones are where God most actively engages us. Difference enriches us. It can open up our hearts to more readily act with compassion. Listen and look friends, as the Holy Spirit offers us an open-ended, ongoing invitation to follow Jesus and take the risk of change. Each small step toward new and different action is one step closer to making God’s kingdom of justice and love more visible in this world. Amen.