Introductory Comments

1. At the outset of his gospel, Matthew lists a genealogy that includes several Gentiles that are the spiritual forebears of Jesus. Early in the gospel, Jesus heals the child (or slave) of a Roman centurion, remarking to the centurion, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith” (8:10). In 8:28-34, Jesus exorcizes the demons possessing two men in the country of the “Gadarenes”, about six miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee and one of the Hellenized towns of the Decapolis, a league of ten Greek cities.

2. Yet, all of this positive interaction and inclusion of Gentiles is met with apparent language of exclusion in places like Matthew 10 and Matthew 15, where disciples are told not to bring their healings or exorcisms to the Gentiles, and Jesus even flat out refuses a request of a Canaanite woman for help by saying, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Worse, Jesus then uses abusive language towards her, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

3. In this session we will consider some things Jesus said about whom the disciples should “shepherd.” We will also examine how one woman refused to let anyone treat her like a sheep.

Questions, then read Matthew 15:21-28

Questions for Discussion

1. The imagery of shepherd and sheep is prominent in the Bible. What do you think this imagery says about the relationship between God and humanity? Being a pastor is like being a shepherd, but is being a congregation like being sheep? It is intended to convey an image of protection and guidance. Some congregations are “sheep-like”, but disciples are learners, not blind followers. Congregations should not be sheep: docile, silent, unimaginative, unthinking. Congregations should be disciples: questioning, asking for clarification, challenging, advancing.

2. Why do you think Jesus does not immediately heal this woman’s daughter as she begs him to? How do you feel toward Jesus throughout most of this story?

3. This story contains the first instance in Matthew’s gospel of a woman speaking directly to Jesus. What significance, if any, do you think this has?
4. Matthew’s gospel would have been presented orally, rather than read by adherents. How might an oral presentation change your perspective of 15:24-26? Some scholars suggest that Jesus is speaking to the woman in words that reflect the accepted prejudices of his day, as if to demonstrate the folly of blanket generalizations in the face of living, breathing people. How plausible do you think this idea is? I find this idea quite interesting – even compelling. In a teaching moment (for both audience and disciples), Matthew may be allowing people to hear the awfulness of their accepted prejudice, or at least the conventional practices of the day. You can almost see Jesus looking back at them as he’s speaking to the woman, to check their reactions. In the end, he moves beyond these limiting ideas and receives the woman and her faith, as well as her request for her daughter’s healing.

5. Scholars have noted that the woman’s final response to Jesus models his instructions in the Sermon on the Mount. “When insulted… do not repay violence with violence, but do not yield your ground, either.” Loving our neighbors means correcting them when they – whether from bigotry, ignorance, or misguided humor – malign those of other religions or ethnicities. Our task is not to call out or cancel, but to call in, with kindness and also firmness. When, if ever, have you had to show this kind of tenacity in the face of indifference or injustice in order to make your voice heard? When have you seen others do so? What happened?

6. Does the Canaanite woman teach us something about the nature of faith? What about the woman’s faith does Jesus ultimately recognize and praise? Why didn’t he do so sooner?

7. Jewish tradition teaches that God is God not just of the Jews, but of the world. Jews are chosen to follow Torah, while Gentiles are chosen for other roles and practices. How does this understanding help us to know what “being chosen” means (whether as Jews or Christians)? Is “being chosen” about the privilege of being part of an exclusive club or is it about certain responsibilities that we have in how we relate to one another?