Friends, I really wrestled with this scripture this past week. It’s an uncomfortable scripture for me. It’s uncomfortable because of what it might say about Jesus, but it’s even more uncomfortable because of what it certainly points out about me.

In our Gospel text this morning we see Jesus in Gentile territory. Remember, the Gentiles are basically any and every group of people who are foreigners or outsiders to the Jewish people; and there’s no love lost between the Jews and the Gentiles. Being around Gentiles was considered risky stuff for Jesus and his companions because they could be infected by the unholy ways and the unholy presence of them. That’s to say—according to their culture and traditions—they could be made ritually unclean just by being near them. They certainly shouldn’t touch them or eat with them or even converse with them. There were sayings about being near Gentiles that basically noted it was better never to even see them. And there’s one saying from a collection of rabbinical teachings that says: “As the sacred food was intended for men, but not for the dogs, the Torah was intended to be given to the Chosen People, but not to the Gentiles.”

That gives you a glimpse of how things stood between the Gentiles and the people of Jesus’ culture at the time of our reading. In the minds of the religious teachers of Jesus’ day the Gentiles were considered as “dogs—as less than human—and, as such, they were thought to be absolutely unworthy of the blessings of God.

And it’s into this moment of humanity that Jesus is placed. It’s in this culture that he’s raised with all its biases and stereotypes and perceived privileges. And as a product of his culture he tries to escape for some rest and relaxation with his disciples into the land of the Gentiles where he figures at least the people will ignore him and he’ll be given the luxury of being able to ignore them as well.

But when he gets to the Gentile’s side of the sea where these outsiders live, he finds his fame as a healer preceded him even here, and they crowd around him. And this one woman comes close and falls at his feet begging him to cast the unclean spirit out of her daughter, and Jesus says what comes trippingly to his lips—the saying so common in his own country—“the food for the children should not be given to the dogs.”

And I have to imagine that as soon as these words slipped from his lips he must have caught the look in her eyes and been convicted of his insensitivity. And I imagine her looking back at him and saying, “But even the dogs eat the crumbs the children drop under the table.” And the deal is done. Jesus knows that he has been changed. His mind has been opened, his narrow vision of his mission has been expanded and never again will he be so narrow-minded and so unthinkingly demeaning to another. And he rises to the moment, he shakes off his provincial exclusivism and heals her daughter, and he publically praises this woman’s faith. And I think—as an even greater witness to the change that’s happened within him—in his very next encounter we see him healing another Gentile, and now there’s no hesitation and no talk whatsoever of “dogs.” Now he’s touching this outsider—which is a very bold move for a man of his country and culture—and he’s sharing the blessings of God with him freely and naturally.

Still, it makes me uncomfortable to think that Jesus would have let this insensitivity slip out in the first place—although, at the same time I think even Jesus must have grown—mentally and emotionally and spiritually as well as physically—during his life and maybe this is an episode that shows us that happening. In fact we know Jesus did exactly that: after he remained as a boy in the temple in Jerusalem—leaving his family frantic to find him—they went back and found him; and we’re told that after that Jesus “increased in wisdom and in years....” And certainly to be told that he “increased in wisdom” implies that there was room for growth... so maybe this is a growing moment even for the Son of God.

So, yeah, that’s one of the ways this text makes me feel uncomfortable. But worse than that is the way it makes me feel uncomfortable about the narrowness of my own mind, my own heart, and my own habits and insensitivities. Jesus seems to have dealt with such things in himself in one sweeping instant. It’s like his mind and heart opened immediately to the truth this foreign woman proclaimed to him and he just accepted that truth and the love flowed out of him instantaneously in these new directions. But for me—I know my insecurities, I know my fears, I know my proclivity to think better of myself and lesser of others; and I know there are others for whom I have to be intentional about grinding down and holding back some of the biases my own culture and experiences have embedded in me. I know that stuff, I’ve known it for a long time... but it’s still not easy.

It’s all too easy to want to cling to the privileges and status that I assume were conferred on me by the happenstance of my birth—privileges and status I’ve done nothing to earn but that I assume were rightfully dropped on me as blessings from God reserved only for me and “my kind.” And I know that’s a lie! But it’s just so hard to give up the places of power once you’ve known them. It’s so hard to give up the assumption of superiority once you’ve claimed it for yourself. It’s so hard to acknowledge that if God’s blessings are truly for everyone, then I must be willing to step back and share some of the blessings I’ve always hoarded for myself.

And maybe that’s what’s really at the bottom of racism from the side of power and privilege. It’s a fear of giving up, a fear of sharing, a fear that more for others means less for me, a fear of admitting that I have been in the wrong at times in the past, it’s a fear of admitting that my culture and my assumptions and my habits and thoughts have not been pure and unspotted by the ways of the world. So, I am reluctant to let go.

But if saying that we’re followers of Christ Jesus has any meaning at all then we must follow him on this path as well all the other paths he took. It’s not enough to call Jesus our Lord and Savior and then deny him by wandering off in directions he intentionally shook-off during his life and ministry. And it’s not enough to give such a life-draining sin as racism the opportunity to live unchallenged in ourselves. It’s not enough to say, “Well, that’s just the way I was raised,” or “Everybody feels that way when they’re honest” or even “Well they’re racist against us too.” Doesn’t matter... that stuff just doesn’t matter; it’s no defense... And in the end I don’t think “a defense” is what we need; what we need is a cure, what we need is a new habit. What we need is a conversion to a new way of seeing, a new way of thinking, a new way of perceiving our God and the gift of life that’s been granted to us; a new way of loving others.

We need a conversion experience; we need that moment that Jesus had when he looked into the eyes of this woman who had come to him—heedless of the shame and countless taboos she’d broken in coming as she did—begging that he’d simply take pity on her daughter and release her from that oppressive unclean spirit that held her captive. We need to see the humanity in her eyes—outsider though she may have been—and recognize that that fear she has is our fear, that love she has is our love, that hope she has is our hope... In short we need to recognize that she is us; we need to recognize that not only is she us in God’s eyes, but we must recognize her as us in our own eyes as well.

In the glory of God Jesus rose above the racism and bias of his culture in that moment... setting her daughter free of the spirit that oppressed her. And, who knows, perhaps if we seek him as earnestly as that woman did so long ago, and beg him as sincerely as she begged on behalf of her daughter, we too might be released from captivity to the unclean spirit that holds so many of us today, and be released into a love for others that is unbounded by distinctions of class or creed, religion or gender, or sexuality or nationality or color. May God lead us to that time when we can truly love God with all our hearts, and love all our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.