I am not alone in struggling with this Gospel--particularly with the way Jesus behaves in it. At the beginning of the Gospel, the Canaanite woman--who both by virtue of her gender and her ethnicity--would have had no status among Israelite men--approaches Jesus. She refuses to let these differences get in the way of what she wants--healing for her daughter. But Jesus seems to be dismissive if not outright hostile to her. In the face of Jesus’ silence, the disciples defensiveness and Jesus’ dismissal, she persists. She even emphasizes Jesus’ higher status calling him “Son of David” a messianic title referencing the line of kings who oppressed her people. Even when Jesus insults her, she chooses to focus not on the insult, but on her certainty that Jesus can and will heal her daughter.

And her faith bears fruit. Jesus finally looks past the variables of gender and ethnicity that separate them; recognizes her faith and heals her daughter. We are left with the uncomfortable feeling that it is HE who has been changed and healed by the encounter as much as the Canaanite woman and her daughter.

Particularly in these polarized times, this Gospel spoke to me about the need for dialogue, persistence and conversion. Especially the Canaanite woman seems to embody qualities which are much needed to heal our deeply divided world. Her willingness to persist in the face of indifference and outright opposition are necessary
to help bring different groups together. She is able to accept differences and even to bear insults without returning them in order to achieve her goal; a model for Christians working for social change.

But this leaves me with the uneasy feeling that Jesus is the “bad guy” in the Gospel. Even if he is testing the woman’s faith, he seems uncharacteristically harsh about it. And if I think of this Gospel as an example of the need for dialogue, Jesus’s role in the dialogue is one of listening and conversion. He seems to stand for all those people who because of their position are able to dismiss those who don’t have the same status and power. But Jesus, eventually recognizes his need for conversion and heals the Canaanite woman’s daughter

Most of us here strive in our various ministries to bring healing to the world; and the Canaanite woman is a clear model for this kind of work, I wonder if Jesus too, in a different way is also a model. He demonstrates the humility to admit our need for conversion of heart in the face of the poor crying out for justice. To admit that we don’t always have all the answers and that we must listen to the very people who are seeking to heal in order to learn from them what they need. Today’s Gospel suggests to me that we who call ourselves Christians must be humble enough to admit that our hearts also need to be changed in the face of those who need to be healed.