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Let's be honest: If we were keeping score between Jesus and the Canaanite woman in today's Gospel, Jesus doesn't do so well: he doesn't even seem to be on his best behavior. Here's how I might count up the score:

The woman is worse than an outsider to Jesus and his Jewish disciples. The Canaanites were the longest-standing enemies of the Jews, going back to the Israelite entry into the Promised Land — which was originally called Canaan — right after the Exodus. You might count this as a point against her. But I give her one point for making the bold move of approaching Jesus at all; another for bringing the real suffering of her demon-tormented daughter to Jesus and asking him for help; and another for addressing him with a classic Jewish title of faith: "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David." So that's three points for the Canaanite woman.

"But Jesus did not say a word in answer to her." He ignored her. Minus one point for Jesus for bad manners.

His disciples urge him to send her away, and he seems to give in to their request. He says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Translation: "You, Canaanite woman, are an outsider. I did not come for you. Get lost." You would think that the Son of God would express God's love for all people a little better, and not stoop to his disciples' level of ethnic and religious snobbery, if not bigotry. Minus one for Jesus.

"But the woman came, and did Jesus homage, saying, 'Lord, help me.'" She does not go away; she comes right back with a gesture and a statement of faith that will later become a basic Christian prayer formula — "Lord, help me." This foreigner, this outsider, believes Jesus is the Messiah and is actually teaching Jesus' disciples — and us — how to pray. Plus two points for the Canaanite woman.

Then Jesus says in reply, "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." Whoa! (Hey, Jesus: Awkward! Politically incorrect! You don't call people dogs! Especially not your enemies. Especially not a woman. To her face.) Wow. You wouldn't expect the Messiah to be so clueless! Minus two points for Jesus.

And then, this woman shows her true character. She still doesn't back down from Jesus' rebuke. With self-deprecating humor and with an insistence that she deserves better from Jesus, she says, "Please, Lord (Note: another statement of faith in Jesus), for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters." She has managed to call Jesus her Master yet again in this clever reply that must have made Jesus laugh. Through her suffering, she reveals a deep, tenacious, resilient faith in Jesus that is an example for the disciples and for us. I wonder if even Jesus learned a thing or two about faith from this outsider. It seems clear that he changes his attitude and behavior because of her. Plus three points for the woman.

Finally, Jesus says, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And the woman's daughter was healed. So let's say we give Jesus four points: one for snapping out of his bad behavior and recognizing this woman's faith; and three for healing her daughter. That still leaves the score at the end of this round:

Canaanite Woman: 8
Jesus: Zero.

That is, of course, if we are foolish enough to try to keep score with Jesus. It may not be a good idea to keep score with the Messiah — especially not with a Messiah who told us to forgive our brothers and sisters "seventy times seven times"; to remove the log from our own eye before we attempt to point out the speck in our neighbor's eye. Jesus is not interested in winners and losers, but in the salvation of all, through God's mercy: "For God delivered all to disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all."

Unfortunately, all too often, we are a people who are foolish enough to keep score. Nearly every area of our lives seems to be
based upon competition: our sports, our economy, our educational system, our social standing. We keep score in ballgames and board games, in gold medals and Oscars, and in the U.S. News & World Report rankings. We are obsessed with keeping track of winners and losers.

We keep score of who are foreigners and aliens, who are immigrants and outsiders, who are "legal" and "illegal." And like the disciples in the Gospel today, we keep score of who we think are insiders and outsiders to God's love and mercy. And that is the most dangerous scorekeeping of them all because in keeping that score, we are playing like we are God; we are trying to make judgments only God can make.

Beginning college is a time it might be tempting to keep score even more than usual. Somehow we get a twisted satisfaction from knowing where we stand in rankings of all things that we might care about, many that we wouldn't want to admit. We keep score of beauty, body types, athletic ability, intelligence, grades, number of friends and kinds of friends, of who is in my group, and who is an outsider. We keep score in race and religion and political preference and sexual orientation and lifestyle. We keep score with income, with homes, with cars, with clothes and with cell phones. With hazardous and sometimes tragic results, we keep score in drinking games and in sexual games. We keep score of pride and honor, sometimes with serious verbal or physical violence done to others and to ourselves.

If God keeps score at all, it is clear that God tallies the score differently from how we human beings do. Are there really insiders and outsiders in God's love? Isaiah says: "The foreigners who join themselves to the Lord ... loving the name of the Lord and becoming his servants — who keep the Sabbath ... and hold to my covenant — them I will bring to my holy mountain and make joyful in my house of prayer ... for my house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples."

Does not God's love embrace people of all nations, all religions, all races, all sexual orientations, all abilities, all kinds of beauty and intelligence and education? Does not God's love embrace even public sinners? God does not keep score the way we do.

And isn't each one of us that Canaanite woman, in some way or another? Most citizens of the United States are immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Most Christians today come from Gentile ancestors, not from the Chosen People of Israel. At one point or another, we all were — or still are — strangers, aliens, immigrants and outsiders. It is a good thing that we have a God whose love extends to all the nations, with a special love for the poor, for outcasts and for sinners. Aren't we all sinners who are saved not by our own righteousness, but by the irrevocable mercy of God?

"O God, let all the nations praise you ... because you rule the peoples in equity; the nations on earth you guide."

The Canaanite woman of resilient faith has a lot to teach us. May we stop keeping score — especially of who we think is inside or outside of God's love.

And may we pray for God's mercy even more: "Lord, help me. Son of David, have pity."

Although we are aliens and strangers and outsiders lost in our sinful scorekeeping, make us your holy people nonetheless. Make us joyful in your house of prayer.

And with the Canaanite woman, may we indeed long to eat the scraps that fall from the Master's table — scraps of the most precious and perfect kind; humble portions of the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation, the body and blood of the Master himself, broken and poured out, so that we — and all the nations of the world — might live.

— Father Chris Wittmann, S.M., director of campus ministry

Readings:
Isaiah 56:1,6-7
Psalm 67: "O God, Let All the Nations"
Romans 11:13-15, 29-32
Matthew 15:21-28