

Twentieth Week of the Year: Jesus and the Syrophenician woman.

Jesus finds himself in an area filled with Gentiles, people who aren't like him, people who have a different history, who don't worship like him, who don't eat like him. I can imagine that he just wanted to be left alone, to get to wherever he was going and to turn in for the night. Canaanites are a race apart. And already the disciples are wary. I can hear them saying to each other: "We are not going to associate with Canaanites. They're bad--they've always been bad--they're unclean--they don't worship our God. Doesn't this woman know who we are?" Yet there she is, in the middle of the street--wailing desperately: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; Help me! My daughter is not well. She's tormented by a demon." Jesus doesn't say anything. He just keeps going. He just leaves it alone. But there she is, still crying out, creating a scene. "Get lost, lady!" one of the other disciples might have yelled. Get her out of here. Send her away; she keeps shouting after us." Jesus pauses, and he turns back to the woman. This is where we'd expect Jesus of all people to understand where this woman is coming from. We would anticipate this scene to play out like a typical miracle story from the Gospels: A woman cries out, the disciples scoff, Jesus rebuffs the Disciples and heals, and everyone learns a valuable lesson. But it doesn't go like that. In fact, Jesus acts harshly, even rudely: "Woman" he says, "I'm here to feed the children of Israel, not the Canaanites, and not you. It's not fair to take the children's bread and feed it to the dogs, now is it?"

What is it Jesus is saying? The debate has been going on for centuries: Maybe Jesus was tired and in a bad mood. Or perhaps he was testing her. It's possible that the human side of him was mistaken. We could tie ourselves in theological knots trying to find the true answer. Maybe we should hear this encounter as a parable playing out within the larger story that Matthew is telling and think of it as something like a riddle with multiple answers.

What matters most in this story is not the initial rejection but the action that follows: "I shouldn't throw the food to the dogs," Jesus says. "Yes, Lord," replies the woman. "Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table. Even we Canaanites are entitled to the scraps, don't you think?" What reaction appeared on the disciples' faces when they heard that? Their mouths agape open their eyes wide open. It was a brave act on her part--those bold and jarring words--an action that rattled everyone's assumptions. We can't read Jesus' mind in this story and we probably will never know why he acted the way he did. But we do know that he was moved by what the Canaanite woman said; he was moved by her passion and her persistence and her faith. Jesus grants her the mercy that she sought. He heals her daughter and restores their family.

This unusual encounter with the Syrophenician woman shows us that faith is not always simple or straightforward. Speaking up for ourselves and others, calling out injustice, challenging the status quo--these aren't signs of weak faith or a lack of belief. Jesus pronounces this type of persistence "great faith." The woman comes from a long line of assertive biblical figures who will not take "no" for an answer, who have engaged in a "spiritual struggle going all the way back to Jacob who wrestled with an angel in the Book of Genesis.

Who is the Syrophenician woman today? Where is she? Perhaps she is part of the one in six Americans who don't have enough food to eat, or maybe she is one of the millions who face daily violence and abuse. And maybe she is the victims targeted by the hate groups brought into sharp relief this week in Charlottesville, Virginia.

We certainly cannot associate the disciples with hate groups, neo Nazis, white supremacists and the like, but the bigotry which they embrace toward this Canaanite woman must be called out for what it is. None of us would ever imagine that we have anything in common with the sinful attitudes and behavior of any group that embraces or promotes racism except that I remember my grandparents and other relatives of my childhood whose prejudiced attitudes towards other races or Jews was a culturally and

regrettably acceptable thing. While we think we have come a long way since those days, Charlottesville is a reminder that we still have a long way to go. These tensions, conflicts and demonstrations; the emerging awareness that public statues celebrating those who supported such attitudes, is causing all of us to think. It's challenging my assumptions. I am accustomed to seeing a statue of Robert E. Lee and think about the Civil War and American History and my mind wouldn't go much farther than "that statue really looks good in the middle of that park..." and then move one.

Did it make me think about Jim Crow laws and the plight of African-Americans for the next 100 years? No. Or for that matter did I make any connection between those statues and the KKK, who targeted not only the Blacks but Jews and Catholics as well? No. It never occurred to me to discover the fact that most of those monuments across America were erected in the 1920s during the height of KKK influence. It just didn't occur to me to consider the uncomfortable reality they represent to descendants of slaves.

Today Jesus comes face to face with an uncomfortable reality...the reality that my mission and my understanding of who God loves needs to get a little wider. Some say we cannot side step the past thinking the problems will go away by removing statues. Some say we cannot do otherwise as the very presence of such statues implies that even though defeated in the civic forum, the ideals and attitudes of those represented by such statues are cast in bronze as if waiting for a more opportune time for such attitudes to re-emerge. In the mean-time those among us whose ancestors have been the victims and who themselves are always looking over their shoulders are crying out for help.

How often do we sidestep someone who is crying out to us for help? And, you know, we sometimes get a little defensive or even offended when someone else points out an injustice to us. This is truly a Gospel issue that goes even further than race. It touches on our own humanity and personal worth. We live in a world that is hungry--not just physical hunger, but spiritual hunger, too. People all around us long to be fed by things that have meaning and substance. We long to be part of something bigger, to be given direction, to be loved. And some of us are so desperate that we cry out in the street, "Have mercy on me!" Just a crumb, just a scrap will suffice. Part of our Christian journey, our calling through our baptism, is to listen for those people calling out in pain or hunger or torment--to be attuned to their needs, to meet them where they are, to let them speak to us on their own terms.

And sometimes they may seem as strange and foreign as that Canaanite woman. What she has to say to us today may sound as jarring as her words to Jesus. They may even shake our worldview and challenge our assumptions. And if you, listening today, are the Canaanite woman--if you're the one crying out in the streets to seemingly no avail--don't be afraid. Take heart. Don't apologize for your persistence. God hears you and even in times of struggle and doubt, God proclaims your faith to be great. It's no coincidence that after this encounter with the Canaanite woman, the next thing that Jesus does in Matthew's story is to go down to the sea and meet with a crowd of 4,000 hungry people. And he will feed all 4,000 of them from just seven loaves of bread and seven fish. God has this amazing ability to bring about change in the most astonishing ways, through the most unexpected people. God's work in our lives is always surprising us, always jarring us, always shaking up our worldview. God makes abundance out of scarcity. God is constantly taking the scraps from our table, the crumbs that we discard, and turning them into a feast. A feast to which we are all invited.

Because of the perseverance of this outsider from the Land of Canaan, through her outspokenness, we catch a glimpse of God's vision for our world: It's a world where grace comes to us in the most unexpected ways, where the smallest speak with the loudest voices and the powerful act with humility. Like the Canaanite woman, we too hold tightly to the promise of the Lord, the Son of David... "Brother and sisters," he says to us today, "great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish." God's mercy and love are for all people--for those with little faith and those with great faith, for those who are hungry and those who are full, for the disciples and the Canaanite woman, for me and for you.

So, what do we do with the scraps, those crumbs collecting on our table?

***Let us pray.* God of abundance, we give you thanks for people like the Canaanite woman, for people who rattle us with the truth. Help us to really hear the voices, the cries of others, to those who seek mercy. Feed all of us with your grace and bring us to the day when all may gather at one table here and at your banquet table for eternity. We pray in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.**