

Pentecost 14- Year A
17 August 2008
Saint Anne's Episcopal Church
Lee's Summit, Missouri

Matthew 15:21-28

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love. AMEN.

If you have ever visited the chapel at St. Luke's Hospital on the Plaza, you may have been drawn back to that place this morning as you heard the gospel read. The reason for this, for those of you who haven't been in the chapel at St. Luke's, is that the large mosaic behind the altar there is a portrayal of the story we have just heard.

It's a beautiful piece of art – one that I saw daily as I completed my summer of Clinical Pastoral Education during seminary. A shimmering mosaic in bright colors. Jesus and the Canaanite woman in conversation. With the words from the gospel story at the bottom, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

In addition, to its beauty, there is great power in that mosaic. That mosaic has spoken to the family members of many patients and to those who care for patients in that place. I can vividly remember one very distraught brother of an injured man – a brother filled with shock and anger, who felt distanced from God by what had occurred to his loved one - who was finally able to pray and to shed tears, as he touched that mosaic.

The mosaic at the St. Luke's Chapel is beautiful and powerful. But, that mosaic in a hospital chapel could be a bit deceiving. It might lead us to think that this story about Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman is a healing story.

Now, clearly, a healing is a part of the story, but I don't think that healing is the central focus. Here, the healing of a girl tormented by a demon provides the situation for a dialogue that has far-reaching consequences. In this story, I think the healing is the means that gets Jesus and us to a very important end.

I have to admit that every time I read this story, I find myself wincing just a little bit. Wincing because, frankly, Jesus doesn't come off too well in this story. The words we hear coming from Jesus' lips in this story don't sound very pretty to our 21st century ears; they are not all words of compassion and love.

This may not sound like the Jesus we've come to expect, at least not the Jesus we'd like to expect. I have to admit it – this story can be downright distressing,

Now, some commentators have tried to justify Jesus' unseemly behavior in this story, to explain it away, and others have appeared to pretend that Jesus' unseemly behavior actually didn't happen quite the way it was described or at least it wasn't as bad as it sounds.

But, I don't think we can let Jesus or ourselves as biblical interpreters off that easily. If we can resist the temptation to save Jesus, to clean up his behavior so that it fits our 21st century expectations, then I think we may be able to gain some new insights into what Matthew's gospel is trying to tell us.

Let me say clearly that this is not an easy story to interpret because it does sound so shockingly distressing to us.

Let's recount the basics of the story. Jesus had withdrawn to the district of Tyre and Sidon, on the border of Galilee. We are not told why he made this retreat from Galilee, but there surely were some good reasons for Jesus to need some time away. He was experiencing opposition to his teaching from the religious leaders, yet large crowds were drawn to him and were pressing him with demands for healing.

And, it wasn't too long ago that Jesus had received word of Herod's execution of his kinsman John the Baptist. The Roman Empire was striking back at the teaching and preaching about God's kingdom that both John and Jesus had been engaged in.

It must have been a dangerous, stressful, and tiring time for Jesus. And, so Jesus had gone "off the beaten path," so to speak, to Tyre and Sidon. An area that one commentator has called, "paganland." An area with a predominantly Gentile population.

No sooner had Jesus gotten there than a Canaanite woman began yelling at him, asking him to heal her daughter who was demon possessed.

The modifier that the gospel writer used - "Canaanite" - clearly identified this woman as a Gentile. By calling her Canaanite, the gospel writer wanted us to understand, with absolutely no doubts, that this woman was not a Jew. You see the word "Canaanite" wasn't a word used in first century Palestine. This was a word from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, if you will.

Canaanites were among those people who occupied the Promised Land before the people of Israel got there. They were bitter enemies of Israel. They were among those who God had told the children of Israel to remove completely from the land promised to them.

So, here we have a woman, a Canaanite woman - the ultimate outsider, a total foreigner, as far as a pious first century Jewish man was concerned.

And, Jesus – a pious first century Jewish man - treated her as an ultimate outsider. Initially as she cried out to him, he simply ignored her. It was as if she did not exist.

But, clearly this obnoxious, pushy, screaming outsider was getting on the disciples' last nerve. All they wanted was for Jesus to get rid of her.

“Jesus, heal her child, don't heal her child, just get rid of this woman who is yelling at us, annoying and irritating us, and making a public spectacle of herself.”

And, Jesus' only reply to the disciples was to say basically, “This Canaanite woman and her demon-possessed daughter are none of my business. I have come for the lost sheep of Israel. My mission is for the Jews, and frankly that's about all I can handle.”

Jesus still hadn't spoken directly to the woman, but he'd clearly dismissed her and her heartfelt request on behalf of her daughter by what he said to the disciples. Most of us would have probably quietly moved on, slunk off into the darkest corner of Tyre and Sidon, if we had been treated like this.

But not this woman. No, the behavior of Jesus and the words of the disciples didn't seem to faze her. She was not deterred; she was persistent. She was single-minded, and she **knew** that Jesus could do what she needed him to do for her. She had faith. With no pretension, she begged Jesus as she knelt before him and said plainly, “Lord, help me.”

And, in his first direct response to the woman, Jesus said “I can’t help you. It just wouldn’t be right. It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

And, with that, Jesus called this woman and all those like her, all non-Jews, a nasty name. It would be a nasty name now, and it was definitely a nasty name then. It was a derogatory name that Jews used for Gentiles. They were dogs.

And, then this persistent, begging, clever woman looked at Jesus and said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

And, with this, Jesus recognized the woman’s great faith and gave her what she had asked for. He healed her demon possessed daughter instantly.

In this story, we see Jesus act as just what he was – a first century Jewish man. He displayed behavior that would not have been shocking or surprising to people of his day, even though it might be shocking and disturbing to us. Jews and Gentiles alike would have understood perfectly what was going on in his conversation with the Canaanite woman.

In this story, we see a very human Jesus. Frankly, I think most of us may feel more comfortable with the God-part of Jesus than we do with the human-part of Jesus. We may forget that Jesus had to learn to walk and to talk just like any other human child. He had to develop emotionally and physically as all human beings must develop and grow. Jesus was a human being who got tired and who needed rest and time alone; a human being who got hungry and thirsty; a human being who could experience physical pain, profound grief, and explosive anger.

In this story, we see the human Jesus brought up short by an unexpected truth. This pagan woman had in essence said, “Yes, Jesus, I know that Israel does have priority in God’s purposes. But, surely, God isn’t that exclusive. Surely, there is room for me and my daughter, too. Even if it’s only cleaning up the scraps under the table.”

And, with that the human Jesus learned something. The world around him had influenced his thinking and his doing. The mission of the human Jesus was enlarged in accordance with God’s inclusive, unconditional love for the world God had created. And, in the healing of the daughter of a pagan woman, all the rest of us Gentiles were brought into the mission of Jesus.

In this story, we see ourselves mirrored in Jesus. We see a reflection of ourselves – not necessarily our best selves.

But, we also see mirrored in Jesus the very best of human potential, humanity as God intended it in creation. We see a reflection that shows us that through God’s in-dwelling spirit we, too, can learn and enlarge our own views about those we ignore and avoid and fear. Our experiences with the world can change our thinking and doing.

So, this morning, may we look at our reflection in the mirror that this story holds up for us. Who are the outsiders that we ignore and avoid and fear? Who is it that we judge not worthy of our attention? Who is it that we treat as if they were outside God’s love?

Listen. Perhaps it is in the loud voices of outsiders - those voices that can at times annoy us, irritate us, and even get on our nerves – perhaps it is in those voices that we can find unexpected truth. Listen. Perhaps it is in those voices that we can hear the voice of God. AMEN.