

## Proper 15, Pentecost XIV August 17, 2008

There are in the Bible, in both the Old Testament and the New, passages which have been especially important, especially formative, to me as a person, as a Christian, and as a Priest. These are passages I see as vivid examples of a golden thread that runs through the Bible and our tradition—a thread that reveals the heart of God, and of our faith. They are passages that have changed my life. The section from Matthew’s Gospel we just heard is one of these. When I first studied it so long ago in Seminary—and I spent a lot of time on it both then and since—it was an “Aha” moment; a moment of clarity and of gift.

What’s going on is this: Jesus is in the region of Tyre and Sidon. These were pagan cities in Syria, North of Israel. (In fact, this is the only time the Bible records Jesus being outside Israel). Some commentators have suggested that Jesus is on vacation, or on retreat.

It’s here, on pagan soil, that he’s met by a Canaanite woman. We need to be clear on what this means. It wasn’t like Jesus was an Episcopalian and she was a Methodist, (or even a southern Baptist). No, she was a real pagan. A full-fledged, totally unclean, pork-eating, law-breaking, idol worshiping, funny-language speaking, differently colored, uneducated, Sabbath-ignoring enemy. And all that’s in addition to her being woman—which, the sad fact is, back then was bad enough.

This woman starts nagging Jesus about healing her daughter and Jesus simply ignores her. He walks on.

She keeps talking and Jesus keeps walking. In fact, if the disciples had not asked him to shut her up, the chances are that Jesus never would have responded.

In spite of commentators to the contrary, there is no hidden agenda, no subtle planning behind this silence. Jesus wasn't softening her up, or testing her—he was just moving on.

And when Jesus finally speaks, there is no secret affection behind his initial rejection of her request, or in the insulting way he puts it. He really meant it. There is just no way to call someone's desperately ill daughter a dog and be nice about it at the same time. Jesus simply wasn't about to waste the children's food. He was convinced that his mission was only to the Jews, the lost sheep of Israel—and he meant just exactly what he said. To use an analogy from a restaurant, this wasn't his table. Jesus knew where he was, and who she was; and besides all that, he was off duty.

In rejecting both her and her request for healing, Jesus is standing firmly and clearly within his tradition. There were well over 1,000 years of religious and historical precedent behind what he said and did; (think about that, 1,000 years). And both the Scriptures and the social and legal realities of the day were nicely summed up in his reply. Besides, if you healed too many of those pagan foreigners, they might multiply and move in and do awful things, who knows—take jobs away from people who really counted, spread disease, whatever. So, the disciples asked Jesus to run her off and Jesus tried to do just that. All of that is ordinary. It's what everyone expected—including, no doubt, the woman herself.

Now, here's where it gets special. I am convinced that the next few moments in this story are not ordinary moments; instead, they are powerful moments of insight and of revelation—they are a time of God breaking in. What happens looks simple enough: the woman talks back to Jesus and holds her own, point for point, in what amounts to a running argument. And in that argument, and in this woman, Jesus saw something that must have astonished him.

He saw beyond her tenacity and her wit (both things he doubtless admired). He saw beyond her gender, her religion, her nationality, her status, and every sort of identity the world and its institutions, including its religious institutions, gave her. He saw beyond all of that to a faith that could not be denied, a faith that could only be a gift from God.

In this woman, Jesus saw his father's hand at work, his Father's presence—his father's call to him. I believe that this was one of those times when Jesus experienced a moment of revelation; and with it a sort of crisis. Something dreadfully important was at issue, and Jesus had to choose.

On the one hand, he could keep faith with scripture and with his tradition—he could just keep doing what he and everybody else had been doing for so long—and walk past the dog that did not deserve the children's food. Or he could choose to reconsider, to change everything—he could choose to rethink and expand the scope and the meaning of his calling, indeed the scope and the meaning of God's very nature.

So the Lord stood there and looked and listened, as God's word came to him—not in the form of a dove sent from heaven, not in words that sounded like thunder to those watching, not in a flash of light or a familiar quotation. God's word came to him in heavily accented Aramaic, from an alien face, in a foreign and unfamiliar place. And in that sacred moment, in the most unexpected of places and ways, Jesus is once more moved even deeper into the will and the mind of his father; and Jesus chose, and the world shifted. The daughter is healed, and the kingdom of God, and everybody's ideas about who God is, and the meaning of the vocation of the Son of Man, all of these are suddenly a whole lot bigger than they had ever been before.

Notice also that after he healed her daughter, Jesus did not lecture the woman; he did not require that she change and become a Jew; he did not demand that she follow the religious or the moral law that Jesus held so dear. He saw her faith, and that was enough. There was simply the gift of that moment, and the choice to be made.

From that day on, questions like, “Who’s in and who’s out?” “Who counts and who doesn’t?” Questions like “how do we know what God will have us do?” and “Is there any reason to change?” and even “where do we look to find an answer?”—these questions were never the same to Jesus, and they will never again be the same to those who, like the Canaanite woman, call him “Lord.”

Something very important happened that day in the district of Tyre and Sidon. Something that changed Jesus, something that could change us. It has to do with the wideness of God’s mercy; and with the power of faith and grace over even our most cherished categories and preconceptions.

Now, we need to be careful here. Perhaps the easiest way to misuse this story, and my take on it, is to use it as a sort of rock to throw at people who believe differently from the way we do—maybe at people whom we see as less open and less accepting than we see ourselves as being; and in doing this to congratulate ourselves on how open and accepting we are. That just won’t do; this story goes much deeper than that; it’s more radical than that. Remember, Jesus was as negative to the woman as the disciples were.

It’s not about our friends who others see as enemies. It’s about our enemies; about those who challenge our deepest values and our strongest beliefs. This little story is about turning *our* world upside down. With Jesus the focus was a Canaanite woman. We have to fill in the blank, for our own lives, for our own selves.

Much of the ethic of Jesus is like that.

So, this little story doesn't tell you, or me, or anybody else, what specific things we should do any or every time our preconceptions are challenged, or our comfort zone is tested. But it can remind us that it is not enough simply to respond automatically, by category, reflex or habit. It can remind us that God's word just might come to us in all sorts of ways, from all sorts of faces.

It can call us to pause, to look closely, to listen carefully to those we might call 'dogs', or worse; and perhaps, to hear the Word that Jesus heard, the word that the kingdom, and the reach of those who seek and serve the kingdom, are bigger than we ever imagined.

My life has never been the same since I began to realize this; and I wanted to share that with you.