

While we are away ... reflections for the Pentecost season
August 16, 2020 – 11th Sunday after Pentecost

We continue in the 'green' season of Pentecost, following Jesus and his ministry as we think about the Spirit-led ministry of the Church. Here is Pastor Steve's message for The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost. This the day we have set for an outdoor service. This will be videotaped and made available on line via our website.

Lessons for Pentecost 11

Psalm 67; Is. 56:1, 6-8; Matthew 15:21-28

Let's just get this out there ... this is not a favorite Bible passage of mine. No, it stings my ears to hear Jesus' stinging words spoken to a Canaanite woman with a suffering daughter. It stings my ears to hear a woman, who just cried out, "*Lord, help me*", addressed with these words: "*It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.*" Maybe I should just focus on the Psalm that invites us to turn to God with our cries: "*May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us.*" Or, perhaps the lesson from Isaiah, with a much more gracious approach to foreigners: "*I will bring them to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer.*" But like that disaster on the track that racing fans cannot ignore or take their eyes off, I cannot ignore or just walk away from these words of Jesus. After all, I am a fan of Jesus.

How do we explain these words of Jesus – spoken to a woman and a foreigner? This is Jesus who spoke so gently to the woman with the flow of blood who touched his garment in the crowd. This is Jesus who pointedly made the hero of his parable about loving one's neighbor a despised Samaritan. This is Jesus who spoke to the outcast Samaritan woman at the well so tenderly that she shared her deepest and most personal longings. This is Jesus who consoled a widow at Nain and raised her son as was being escorted to his burial.

What is going on with Jesus' treatment of this woman in today's Gospel lesson?

Matthew tells us that Jesus has gone away – to the district of Tyre and Sidon. He has just had a contentious time dealing with the Pharisees and scribes, the religious elite of the day. They had criticized his disciples for not washing before eating – he had rebuffed them with these words: "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that proceeds from the heart that defiles."

Now, he has left Israel for the foreign district of Tyre and Sidon. Jesus intentionally goes into a foreign territory, outside the reach of Israel. Just as he intentionally went through Samaria on that trip that brought him to the woman at the well. Jesus knows where he is going. Do you suppose he knew he might meet a foreigner, a Canaanite woman, along the way? Do you suppose he knew that he would meet a foreigner who would know about him? Do you suppose he knew he would meet a 'tiger mom', so protective of her daughter that she would doggedly contend with Jesus, to get the healing her daughter needed?

What do you suppose the disciples were thinking as they went into that foreign land? The disciples bring their Jewish sensibilities of clean and unclean, of insider/outsider, with them to this land of foreigners. They know that when you go into a foreign country you don't touch things and you keep your distance. Kind of like our 2020 COVID quarantining! We can imagine these cautious disciples following Jesus into this foreign place – having no desire or intention of getting close to anything.

They are soon confronted with a foreigner. They knew this might happen! But the foreign woman makes a cry that is hardly foreign – “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.” The disciples had already heard this cry, “Have mercy, son of David” in their own land – on the lips of two blind men calling for Jesus to heal them. Now, in this foreign land, they hear Jesus addressed as ‘son of David’. Remember how Matthew began his Gospel: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of God, the son of Abraham.” The phrase that comes out of this foreign woman’s mouth shows that she may be considered an outsider, but she has insider insight about Jesus, son of David!

The woman cries to Jesus for help – for her daughter possessed by a demon. Curiously, Jesus does not say a word. But the disciples respond quickly: “send her away – she is crying after us.” That’s what the disciples say, that is what comes out of their mouths, but what is in their hearts prompting these words about this pleading mother who happens to be a foreigner? Now, Jesus speaks, perhaps to speak those other words that reside in the disciples’ hearts. (And, this is how I propose to hear Jesus in these next verses, in this Bible passage that is not my favorite.)

Jesus has been asked by a foreigner for help. The disciples are disturbed by this. Maybe Jesus wants the disciples to hear how the thoughts residing in their hearts really sound. We cannot overlook the woman, who is taking part in this expose, remember the foreigner with the insider’s knowledge? Can Jesus know that she will go along with this? Can Jesus know that she will persist through the disparaging thoughts that will be expressed about her as foreigner?

Whatever we might think, Jesus now speaks: *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”* Jesus’ Jewish disciples are likely nodding at these words. They know - Jesus is our guy, our prophet, our miracle-worker, our healer. This all about establishing a kingdom in Israel. We know well the borders that contain his ministry. The disciples might be content with those borders, those parameters, but the woman, with the daughter in distress, is willing to break boundaries and press on, willing to press Jesus: *“Lord, help me.”* This brings that distressing response of Jesus: *“It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs”*

There! Jesus has put the words to the feelings in the hearts of many who look down upon and despise this stranger. All strangers. Jesus uses a word “dogs” that he knows has been used to defile others, but actually defiles those who utter and direct the words at another human being. The woman with the sick daughter overhears what Jesus has said to the disciples and will by no means be shaken. She has an answer – a humble answer. Addressing him with the title, “Lord” she argues, she suggests, *“even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.”* Bravo courageous Canaanite mother, bravo! For persisting and challenging. Yes, her words are a challenge: Don’t let the table, the feeding table, the food on the table, be limited. Allow the blessings of the table, the master’s table, to overflow for all who are hungry.” No matter what Jesus might be up to in this passage, this woman is determined, she is tenacious, she persists. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel and will not let go until he gets a blessing. This woman will not let Jesus off the hook until her daughter gets the blessing.

Jesus, son of David, is impressed by this woman, the words that have come from her lips have shown her heart. “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” So, a happy ending despite a distressing route to get there, distressing words to get by.

Do you understand why this is not my favorite Bible passage? Our nation is engaged in a dialogue, a review of our history that is filled with stories of who is in and who is out; of who was kept on this side of a boundary and who was on the other side. Who gets in, who is left out. Who gets the main meal society offers, who gets the crumbs. We know that in our history there

have been many, many defiling words used to exclude or put down or judge or divide. I would not want to think that Jesus is in anyway, for any reason, endorsing such dividing practices.

Jesus, son of David, sent his disciples out into all the world. Before his Ascension he sent his disciples to be his witnesses – in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. This mission certainly embraced the words of the prophet Isaiah: *Thus, says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.* Isaiah was speaking to the people as they are about to end their exile and return home, as they were about to cross the boundaries of Babylon and enter the boundaries of their old homeland. Isaiah wants them to hold this vision, of an inviting, inclusive God, God who is not limited by human boundaries, God who embraces all, even those we may label as foreigners.

Jesus traveled to many places in his ministry, traveling through lands within and outside of Israel. He encountered many people along the way, challenging them with the news that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Today, we have a challenging Bible passage – traditions are challenged, disciples are challenged, Jesus is challenged, we are challenged. At the heart of the passage is the heart of a mother – some might label her a foreigner – but she shows her mother's loving, caring heart as she pleads for her daughter – an act none of us would see as foreign. She challenges us to understand the mercy of Jesus, son of David. She challenges us to persist in our faith in that mercy. Thank you, unnamed Canaanite woman/mother, for your witness to us. Amen.