

Genesis 45:1-15
Psalm 133
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32
Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

Have you ever just had one of those days.....you know, the kind of day where you just feel out of sorts all day and nothing seems to be going quite right? Your irritability level is up and your compassion capacity is down. It's a pretty human experience and seems to happen to all of us from time to time. In our gospel lesson today, Jesus seems to be having one of those days. From our own vantage point, we are keenly aware of Jesus' divinity. Perhaps in this passage we are reminded of his humanness as well. He says and does things that seem out of character for the Jesus that we know. He ignores a woman in need ... someone crying out to him for help. And he doesn't chide his disciples when they tell him to tell her to go away. He explains that his mission on earth includes only the lost sheep of Israel. And it's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. In this metaphor, the children are the Israelites and the dogs are the Canaanites. He insults her verbally. He sounds like a racist. This is not like Jesus. It's puzzling. These are not the kinds of things we expect Jesus to say. And these are not the kinds of things we expect him to do. So what's going on here?

To get a better look at the meaning of this passage, let's examine the context in which it is set. Jesus has just chastised the Pharisees for breaking the commandment of God in order to cling to their own traditions. They've lost the heart of the law. They pay lip service to God, but don't honor the meaning of the law. We can see evidence of exactly this phenomenon in our own country in our own day. Jesus goes on to explain to the people who are worried about eating food that is forbidden and might defile the body that what goes into the body does not defile, but what goes out of the mouth that proceeds from the heart is what defiles. He then goes on to list of the vices that come from evil intentions: murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness and slander ... and there are numerous others that we have experienced and that we could add.

And then Jesus and his disciples head toward Tyre and Sidon. It's gentile territory on the way to the Mediterranean Sea. For Jews this is a 'bad' neighborhood. The Canaanites, who lived in the Promised Land when the Israelites came in to occupy it, still live in this area. The animosity between the two groups has been going on for centuries ... and it's still going on today between the Palestinians and the Israelites. Nothing has changed. From the Jewish

perspective, this is pagan territory. Nothing good can happen here. And as far as the Jews are concerned, nobody good lives here either.

Jesus and his disciples are good Jews. They have grown up hearing all about the Canaanites and they have been told all their lives that they should look down on them as inferior. In the 21st century we are not strangers to this kind of prejudice, stereotype and racism. In a predominately white culture, any African American or Latino can tell you that they are treated differently everywhere they go. Somehow the rules are not the same for them. Somehow they don't get the best seats in the house and they don't get a break at the bank and they are not necessarily presumed innocent until proven guilty. More often than not, the immediate presumption is one of guilt. The ethics of fair play and equal treatment don't necessarily apply. And they don't have equal access to resources. This is not a situation that promotes justice and equality. Citizens of the 21st century are only too well-acquainted with what goes on between the Jews and the Canaanites. It goes on in plain view in our world every day. We may expect this sort of thing from ordinary people, but from Jesus? What's happening with Jesus and this woman who's chasing after him?

In following after Jesus and shouting after him, this woman is breaking all kinds of cultural barriers. First of all, she is a woman and in this culture women do not speak to men in public, even their husbands. They most certainly wouldn't speak to a man who is a stranger. But Jesus is not a complete stranger to her. She knows who he is. She addresses him as "Lord, Son of David." Secondly, she speaks first. She approaches Jesus, not the other way around. A Canaanite, a gentile, would not voluntarily start a conversation with a Jew, particularly not with a group of Jews ... and a group of Jewish men to boot ... who had come into Canaanite territory. Prudent Jewish men wouldn't venture into Canaanite territory anyway. When his disciples urge Jesus to send her away he seems to be agreeing with their attitude of superiority when he says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Jesus seems sure of his mission at this point and perhaps he wants to explain to her why he can't help her. She is a gentile and he's explaining that he hasn't been sent to save the gentiles, just the Jews. But she stays engaged with him. She kneels before him in a gesture of worship and says, "Lord, help me." Jesus' answer is really a startling one. He tells her that it's not fair to take the children's food (Israelites) and throw it to the dogs (the gentiles), but she continues to engage him even though he sounds dangerously like a racist. She answers back and she has a very pithy and sharp answer. Initially she agrees with him and says, "Yes. Lord." And then she makes her point: "Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." As brazen as she is to argue back with Jesus, she gets his attention.

PAUSE

And then something shifts. She has made her point with Jesus. She has challenged him on the whole notion of justice and unequal treatment and the perceived superiority of the Jews. In her willingness to engage with Jesus and her persistence in staying engaged with him something miraculous happens. She's a person now.....not just a woman or just a gentile.....but another human being....and a human being in need. She is part of God's creation. She has been made in the image of God.....just like Jesus and the disciples. Suddenly, when she makes her point and Jesus looks into her eyes, he doesn't see the Other anymore. He doesn't see the stereotype ... he sees a person. He sees a mother in desperate need of a cure for her daughter. Not only does this woman have a right as a human being to be treated as well as anyone else, but she now has a relationship with Jesus. He has *heard* her. He has really *seen* her. She is no different than the people he knows in his own village or even in his own family. She has every right to be treated with the same dignity as any other human being. All human beings have the right to be treated with dignity and with justice. Fairness extends to all of God's children, not just the Jews at the table. In short, each human being should treat every other human being in the way that they themselves would like to be treated. Don't we embrace this command as Christians?

But something more happens. In that moment when Jesus truly sees this woman, his heart melts. All the compassion that he has comes to bear. He sees her great faith in him and her desperation in not giving up. She would do anything for her daughter ... including following a Jewish man around and shouting her pleas after him ... and making a spectacle of herself. But she got his attention. She wasn't afraid to meet his words with wisdom and truth of her own either. She was not afraid to speak truth to power ... no matter what the cost. And Jesus tells us "Do not be afraid!" Perhaps he admired her chutzpah. Perhaps when his heart melted with compassion he had no further question in his own mind that he would indeed give her the desires of her heart. He healed her daughter.

Jesus' bad mood at the beginning of this passage, his seeming lack of concern for this Canaanite woman and his exclusionary explanation of Israel's relationship with God seem out of character and a mystery to us. But without that bad start, we would never have been shown the miracle of what happens when one person connects with another person and all the stereotypes and prejudices simply vanish. We could not have been shown that getting to know another person and building a relationship with them makes it impossible for them to be seen as the Other. Both find out how much alike they are. They are just like us!

Jesus' ultimate response to the Canaanite woman is one of compassion and understanding and love. God made all human beings and each one deserves dignity, justice and fair and unbiased treatment. As we were told in the book of Genesis, "... in his own image God made

humankind.” We are to see the spirit and image of God in every person that we encounter. And God provided us with rules of behavior in the Ten Commandments that we are to follow in our relationship with God and our relationships with each other. These commandments are the Israelites’ obligation in their covenant with God. It’s *their* part of the agreement. These are the rules they are to use to determine the ethical treatment of other human beings. And these commandments have formed the basis of civilizations all over the world ever since. All people have the right to be treated equitably without favor or prejudice. And each person has the right to have all the resources they need in order to fully participate in society.

In this story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman we can see her enormous faith that he could cure her daughter and her hope that he would. And we also see her love for her daughter. In this brief encounter between these two we can also see Jesus’ faith in God’s mission for him, his hope for the future of human beings in relationship with each other and God and his love and charity for this woman and her daughter.

In this one encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman, Jesus shows us what **not** to do and he shows us what we are **supposed** to do. The key to dissolving the fear, hatred, and animosity between different groups of people is dependent on our willingness to see each other as people and made in the divine image of God. The relationship building between members of each group whether it’s Christian and Muslim or black and white or gay and straight or religiously fundamental or religiously conservative or politically to the right or politically to the left is crucial. We must listen to each other and truly hear each other. We all must work for justice for all and truly see people; and we all have to let individuals of another group touch our hearts as we touch theirs, so that neither of us is the Other, but we are both children of a living and loving God. And we must be willing, as Jesus was with the Canaanite woman, to let the Other touch us and bring forth our better natures ... our divine selves ... just as Jesus did.

It begins with open hearts ... one encounter at a time.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

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