

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

Psalm 125

James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17

Mark 7:24-37

Have you ever 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 himself seems to be having one of those days. He's just been in a rather extensive harangue with the Pharisees about what sort of behavior defiles a person and he may still be feeling a little peeved. Not only do the Pharisees get it wrong...what goes into the mouth does not defile: what comes out of the mouth is what defiles...but the disciples and his many followers don't seem to be understanding Jesus' explanation either. It's enough to try anyone's patience! From our own vantage point, we are keenly aware of Jesus' divinity. Perhaps in this passage we are reminded of his humanity as well. His humanity is always a good thing for us to keep in mind. His humanity is what makes him one of us. And it is his humanity that makes his gift to us from the cross so breathtaking.

But right now, while he's in gentile territory, he's having a bit of a hard time with a woman, a Canaanite, whose determination and desperation lead her to follow him and harass him. His reaction to her seems out of character to us. The Jesus that we know is kind and forgiving and patient and pays special attention to those folks who are on the margins. We're expecting him to pause in his travels and take care of her, but He does his best to ignore this woman who is crying out for help. And he doesn't chide his disciples when they tell him to tell her to go away. Instead, He explains to her that his mission on earth includes only the lost sheep of Israel...even though he has already been healing anyone and everyone in his path that needed him. But here, to this woman, he says it's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. Wait a minute! Did Jesus just imply that this woman...and all her tribe, the Canaanites....are dogs? This metaphor sounds way out of character for the Jesus that we know. It's not what we expect. So what in the world is going on here?

To decipher the meaning of this passage, let's take a look at 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. 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 name the vices that come from evil intentions: murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness and slander...just to name a few.

And then Jesus and his disciples headed toward Tyre and Sidon. That'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 today...only now we call them Palestinians. The animosity between these two groups has been going on not just for centuries, but for millenia. This is pagan territory. Jews believed that nothing good could 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 or Asian 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 the kind of things that go on between the Jews and the Canaanites. We may expect this sort of thing from ordinary people, but from Jesus? What's happening with Jesus and this woman?

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 approaches Jesus, she speaks first...not the other way around. A Canaanite, a gentile, and a woman would not voluntarily start a conversation with a male Jew, particularly not with a group of male Jews...who had come into Canaanite territory. And 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. Jesus sounds just like all the Jews travelling with him. He's holding up a mirror to them by behaving and sounding just like them in their attitudes and actions. He's drawing in those following him.

But the Canaanite woman 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. She is not deterred. 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.

And then something shifts. She has made her point with Jesus. And Jesus has made his point to all the Jews watching him. 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 the person...a child of God. 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. Both fairness and inclusion extend to all God's children, not just the Jews at the table.

And something even more happens. In that moment when Jesus truly sees this woman, his heart melts. All the compassion he has comes to bear. He sees her great faith in him and her strength in not giving up. She would do anything for her daughter.....including following a foreign 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. Perhaps he admired her chutzpah. Perhaps when his heart melted with compassion he knew that he would indeed give her the desire 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 our own prejudiced souls. Jesus held a mirror up to us. Without that cranky mood of Jesus' we would never have been able to see ourselves in Jesus' unusual attitude. And we wouldn't have been taught the miracle of what happens when one person connects with another person and all the stereotypes and prejudices simply vanish. Without that bad start, 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. Jesus' ultimate response to the Canaanite woman is one of compassion and understanding and love. It is what we have come to expect from Jesus. 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...every single one! 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 scripture of the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman we can see her enormous faith that Jesus 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 we very often do that we shouldn't; and then he shows us what we are supposed to do. He starts out by being oh so very human by doing and saying the things that many of us might do or say...that his disciples were doing and saying...and then he brings us along with him and shows us the way to do it right. The key to dissolving the fear, hatred, and animosity between different groups of people is dependent on open minds, on truly seeing one another, on building relationships 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.....we have to listen to each other and we have to truly hear; we all have to work for justice for all and we all have to 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 it begins one encounter at a time with Jesus at our backs urging us on.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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