

Sermon

Proper 15

August 24, 2014

Have you ever wondered how things were chosen to be in the Bible? Was there a committee? Did they take a vote? Did they argue about what would be included or how a story would be remembered? The truth is that we do not know how the content of the books of the Bible came about exactly. At best, what scholars and students know about the formation of the Bible is based on conscientious research and informed theory. We don't really know for sure, at least as far as all the details.

My New Testament professor, Carl Holladay (who many of us heard speak here about Luke and Acts back in 2012 and 2013) used to describe this uncertainty as a "tunnel" that existed from the time of Christ until the earliest recorded Gospels. Like an archaeologist on a literary dig, we can find snippets of what was in that tunnel and how those different parts informed the four canonical Gospels that we honor in the church.

A primary source for identifying these portions from the tunnel is found in the letters of Paul. Paul's letters were written ten to thirty years before the time the Gospels were written, so his letters reveal at least in part some of the common language of the early church. So for example, Paul referred in Philippians to a hymn about Christ that appears to be well known. He lists a confession of faith in I Corinthians that may have been recited by the early church. And in that same letter, Paul cited what we now know as "the Words of Institution" ("This is my body...") which comes from an ancient Eucharistic liturgy. These portions give us a glimpse of how the early church remembered and worshiped Jesus.

Scholars also tell us that there were various primary sources about Jesus that circulated before the Gospels were written. We no longer have access to these collections, but scholars believe they included parables, sayings, miracle stories, and other parts of the record about Jesus, especially the stories about his Passion, Death, and Resurrection. From this raw material, we believe that the composers or editors of the four Gospels put together their works.

Again, we are not sure how that process was done: was it completed by one editor or a group? Was a Gospel sponsored from one important city like Antioch, Ephesus, or Rome? How closely involved were eye witnesses, like Peter? We don't know for sure. If you would like to hear more about these questions, consider taking EFM next year (or go to seminary)!

But here is one working assumption that I believe is true: however the Gospels were composed and edited, the people involved took stories and teaching from and about Jesus and used it to address important issues that the church was facing in that day and time. Part of the inspiration of Scripture is how the Spirit worked with the human record of Jesus and applied it during the dynamic expansion of

the church in its first decades. Amazingly, the Spirit continues to use these ancient stories to inspire and direct our faith today.

The second part of the Gospel for today is one of those remarkable stories. It is commonly known as the story of the Canaanite woman. However this encounter was first remembered in the church, it was used in two of our four Gospels—Mark and Matthew. It is remarkable for many reasons—a woman is a central character in the story; the woman is a Gentile; and in the story, not only do the disciples look bad (that was not uncommon), but Jesus does not appear in the best light.

So this story remembered and recorded by the early church; and then re-purposed, so to speak, in these two Gospels. At least part of the reason for this was what the early church was facing in its first few decades of existence. The Good News about Jesus—the fact that through him, God’s love was made known to the world—was hard to contain in the early church. People would hear the stories and want to join the community that lived and bore witness to this Good News.

This success, ironically, led to a problem—the church grew up in a tradition that had specific rules about how one could join its ranks; what roles and rights different types of people could enjoy; and what would be expected of people who did join. In those first few decades, the main challenges would include the status of Gentiles, that is people who were culturally and even racially outsiders to their faith; the status of women; and the status of slaves. The church would struggle and fall back and then strive forward over these issues not only for the first few decades of its life, but throughout the centuries, even up to the present day.

So as the church of the first century tried to figure out how to handle its success, it would of course pray and search its corporate memory about Jesus. What did Jesus say? What did he do? How do his words and actions help us to discern how we are to be his followers in our world today? Those are good questions for any follower of Jesus to remember and struggle to answer.

So in the midst of the church’s growth and conflicts, one story of many in the collections was about this brief encounter between Jesus and a Canaanite woman. She represented two of the three main groups that were part of the controversy growing within the early church. How did things go when Jesus encountered a Gentile woman in need of his ministry? What can the church learn from that encounter? Who are we to be as followers of Jesus?

The first thing that stands out to me as I read and reflect on this story is that Jesus seemed to be in a bad mood. More than a few commentators, preachers, and people of faith have spent a lot of energy trying to explain away or better understand Jesus’ attitude. Maybe he was tired—Jesus was human after all. Maybe he was just joking with the woman in order to make a point with his disciples; maybe Jesus winked at her so that she was in on the joke, too. Or maybe this was an example of Jesus’ “growing edge” as a fully human person—he had to grow in his understanding of who he was and what he was about.

This latter interpretation is hinted at when Jesus recited what almost seems to be a mission statement for his ministry, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” If this interpretation

is true, Jesus represented the struggle going on years later in the growing early church. Who are we? Is our ministry limited; or perhaps better stated, focused on just one group of people? Or are we being called to grow and stretch beyond our original understanding of our mission? Jesus appeared to struggle with that issue, too. How would he decide?

In this story, the disciples were not much help. They reprised their typical role in so many recollections—they appear to be indifferent at best and even hostile to a person in need. They seem less concerned with the mission statement issue that Jesus stated and more concerned with convenience or outward appearances—“Send her away for she is crying after us.”

The star of this story, clearly, is the woman. If Jesus personified the question and the struggle about what the church would be, the woman represented the people calling the church to grow not just in numbers but in generosity, flexibility, and compassion. What stands out about this woman, this outsider to the community of faith? I see three things:

1. She was fierce and persistent. She would not be held back by social niceties about the role of women and the rules that govern encounters between cultures. She was focused only on her daughter’s healing.
2. She was tough and she was humble. She knew she could find help from Jesus and she was not too proud to ask him for what her daughter needed so desperately.
3. She was wise and strong and able to respond to hard words in a way that diffused their power and got the result that she and her daughter needed.

I believe this woman and her story helped the leaders of the early church to see their “problem” in a different light. Instead of seeing outsiders and women-- and all those people who were seeking to join the church-- as unacceptable, her admirable qualities that persuaded their Lord, helped to persuade them, too. The church remembered and included this story to help remind them and future generations about what the church is called to be.

Over the past sixty years or so, the spirit of this story of the Canaanite woman has helped the Episcopal Church (and other churches like us) as we have been disturbed by persistent “outsiders.” Like when fiercely persistent people let us know that racial segregation was inconsistent with our calling as followers of Jesus—and slowly but surely, we did change. Or as women told us that they belonged at the table with men as ordained ministers of God’s grace. Or when people sought the church’s blessing on their committed relationship, the church had to admit with Jesus, “Great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.”

Changes like these are not easy—for the people seeking relief and justice; or for the people being stretched by God’s grace to a new understanding of our faith. As we move forward to face our next encounter, these stories of grace accompany and guide us on our journey. Amen.