

Sermon for Pentecost 13 (15A)
Christ Church, Andover
August 14, 2005
The Rev. Jeffrey Gill

Gospel: Matthew 15:21-28

Last week we saw Jesus walking on the water. God incarnate, like the spirit who brooded over the face of the waters in creation. Today we see a much more human picture of Jesus. This week in our staff meeting when we did our Bible study, we read this gospel, and it raised some eyebrows! The comments around the table went something like this: “That’s not very much like Jesus!” “I don’t like to think of Jesus like that. It’s not very accepting!” “I can’t imagine Jesus talking to anyone like that – so out of character!” “This is very exclusive, and Jesus was inclusive, universal.”

Good sermons should never be pure biblical commentary, but this passage deserves some unpacking. How are we to understand Jesus speaking to the Canaanite woman in what to our ears sounds like the most uncompassionate way, going so far as to refer to her as a dog? When the woman first approaches Jesus and says to him, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” Jesus, who always answers people immediately in the gospels, is silent, which in itself is stunning. He ignores her. His disciples are upset by her presence, and they urged Jesus to send her away. He answered them, in her hearing, and said, “I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel – Jews only; no Gentiles welcome.” But she doesn’t stop. She knelt before him and said, “Lord, help me!” And then he speaks in words that sound so offensive to our politically correct ears, “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs!” Jesus calls her a dog. What is that all about? But even this does not deter her. She comes back again, and she says, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

And then there we see a change. Jesus looked at her, and he said, “Woman, you have great faith. Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed.

How can we possibly understand such an encounter and Jesus’ treatment of the Canaanite woman?

Context is so very important to our understanding of scripture. Bear with me for just a minute here. The Gospel of Matthew was written in the late first century, and the issues being dealt with in Matthew’s church were being spoken to in a very specific way through the telling of this little story. It was a church in transition. In the beginning, the church was, of course, totally Jewish, but that changed as the church began to welcome Gentiles. At the time that Matthew writes this Gospel, Jewish and Gentile Christians are struggling with the issue of the proper place of Jewish law in the life of the church and the early Christian community. Should Gentile Christians be required to observe the requirements of the Jewish law, like keeping kosher? How about Jews who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah – did they continue to be bound by the law? These were hot and heavy questions in the first century – at *least* as controversial as any of the big issues we’re dealing with in the church today. They had to do with basic questions that would affect our understanding of “who’s

in” and “who’s out” as far as God is concerned. (We still seem to be trying to figure that one out!)

Just ahead of this little story, Jesus has been involved in a discussion with some of the religious leaders of his time about ritual washings and about food. Food is very important in the context of this early controversy. And Jesus ends up saying that it’s not what goes into your mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of it, for what comes out shows what is in the heart. And heart is the real issue, and always had been from the time of Moses and the prophets. This was not to negate the Jewish law or to say that it wasn’t important and that following it no longer mattered, but Jesus said this to remind those to whom he was sent of the true meaning and purpose behind the law.

After this debate with the scribes and Pharisees we find Jesus coming to Tyre and Sidon – the only time in Matthew’s gospel that Jesus goes outside Jewish territory, except for the escape to Egypt following his birth. And here, venturing into new territory, he encounters a Gentile woman – a Canaanite. Her words present a real contrast with those of the Pharisees and scribes who, just a moment ago, had criticized Jesus for allowing his disciples to eat without the appropriate ritual cleansing. *Their* words were intended to expose Jesus and to ruin his reputation. *This Gentile woman* has only words of reverence and faith.

She said, “Have mercy on me, Lord,” bringing to mind the *Kyrie eleison* (Lord, have mercy) of the Mass. Her words are “all Christian confessions reflecting the liturgy of the church, adapted from the prayer language of the Psalter” (Boring, 336), words that would have been recognized as such by Matthew’s community as they heard this story read, words which, coming from the lips of a Gentile woman, would have caused them to stop and think yet more deeply about what was really important: the demands for ritual purity as taught by the scribes and Pharisees, or the obvious purity of heart in a Canaanite woman, evidenced by the words she spoke.

Walter Brueggemann, one of the great biblical scholars of our time, points out that “it helps to recognize that this is a story told from a Jewish point of view... The recurring theme of Matthew’s narrative (is) that the gospel belongs first to Israel. Though the Jewish religious authorities repeatedly come in for scathing judgment, the narrator of this Gospel wants to make absolutely clear that God has not abandoned the Jews, God’s faithfulness to the covenant remains, and Jesus’ ministry is first and foremost to Israel.” (Brueggemann, 449-450).

It also helps to remember that Jesus often tries to slow down the pace of his self-disclosure. This started at the very beginning of his ministry when his mother asked him to provide wine at a wedding. Jesus told her, “My hour has not yet come” (John 2:4). Of course, he ended up doing what his mother had asked him to do, and he saved the day. But he hesitated lest his premature disclosure compromise his mission. In another situation, he healed people and then told them to “tell nobody.” He was pacing himself. So it seems to be in his encounter with the Canaanite woman: If he allows this woman to push him too far too fast, the people of Israel to whom he has been sent will be able to simply dismiss him as a Gentile-lover.

With that in mind, you can then feel his hesitation in the initial silence toward the woman. And then, when she continued her plea, you can almost see him take a big breath, glance at her with a wink in his eye, as if to say, “here we go – hang with me here for some rough riding” – and he rebuffs her, saying to his disciples, “it is not fair to take the children’s bread and feed it to the dogs” – difficult words to our ears, but perfectly accepted in his own culture – words that lent him credibility with the ritual purists on the one hand, while getting to his real point from the debate just ended, which is that what is in the heart matters infinitely more than whether you are kosher or not.

And so, what happens next? She pushes back, perhaps in anger, perhaps in desperation, perhaps even understanding his dilemma, and she says: “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

Perfect! She had uttered words of such humility, of such purity and faith, that it would be obvious to all that even a Gentile woman could be saved. And Jesus says to her what he says to no other person: “Great is your faith!” You have overcome insurmountable obstacles as far as those who are so focused on the law are concerned, to be named among those whose faith is truly great.

Where is the sermon in this for us?

First of all, life is messy sometimes. Jesus was, yes, fully human, and fully immersed in a particular culture and time, which meant that he sometimes had to get down and dirty and to do what was demanded by the culture and circumstances in order finally to make a difference and to begin to effect change. I’m reminded of street ministers who work with gangs, who have to speak the language of gang members if they’re going to be accepted and finally make a difference in the lives of troubled youth. Or of business people who learn to navigate the corridors of corporate power in order to be agents of positive change. It’s too easy sometimes for religious folks to talk only to ourselves and to people whom we know agree with us, and to be just a little too self-righteous about how corrupt the world out there is (however we define that), while never developing the skills or the credibility in the eyes of the world to ever truly become agents of change. When we do that, we have become scribes and Pharisees, more concerned with getting our hands dirty or eating the wrong thing, or doing the liturgy just right, or seeming to others to be righteous, than we are about what’s deep down in our hearts.

Another take-away for me in this story is the absolute persistence of the Canaanite woman. She is the patron saint of those who refuse to be silenced in pursuit of a just cause, those who refuse to stay in the closet no matter how uncomfortable coming out of it might be for other people, of those who refuse to just accept things as they are because someone said that’s the way it is. And yet she does it with such humility and grace, with a dose of good humor, and with such incredible faith.

And finally, I see in this story a parable of a church and a world that really can change, that really can get used to the idea that things we couldn’t even imagine before are now possible. That Gentiles, of all things, can be a part of God’s plan, too. That women can have a voice, too. That people who didn’t think they could ever have anything to do with each other *really*

can. That those who are doubly or triply outside can be the ones who in the end are the examples of great faith to those on the inside.

“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table” (v. 27). We can almost see the gleam in her eye as she senses the power of her comment, claiming her rightful, if modest, privileges, and in the process helping to change the world. May her example give us courage and inspire great faith in us, too.