

The Rev. Kristin Krantz
St. James', Mt. Airy
8/20/17

Pentecost 11/Proper 15A
Genesis 45:1-15
Psalm 133
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32
Matthew 15:[1-20], 21-28

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

Jesus left that place and went to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

What does that mean to you? Does it mean anything?

For Jesus and his friends – for those who would have first heard this story, and later those who would read it – it meant a lot.

Tyre and Sidon was a Gentile region, not a place for prudent Israelites. Racial stereotypes and bigotry informed all the encounters between Israelites and the Canaanites that lived there.¹

The very word Canaanite was charged with theological significance, it stirred up memories of ancient foes – idol-worshipping enemies over against whom the people of Israel defined themselves.²

At this point in Matthew's Gospel Jesus' mission was still limited to the house of Israel. In Chapter 10 when he sent out the disciples, he told them not to go to the Gentiles, and indeed he reiterates this in today's passage saying, *I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*

¹ Dock Hollingsworth, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, Homiletical Perspective.

² Iwan Russell-Jones, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, Theological Perspective.

Why he went to this Gentile place, knowing all of this, we don't know.

What we do know is that it changed him, and his understanding of God's mercy and mission.

This small story – this one interaction among all in his lifetime, was transformative for him and it can be for us, as I believe it speaks to us more powerfully now than it ever has before.

+++

Something we too often forget is that Jesus was human – fully human – as well as fully divine. We pay lip-service to the incarnation – God becoming flesh – but we're a lot happier with perfect, holy Jesus.

Perfect, holy Jesus may have harsh words for the hypocrites, but he's ultimately all loving – and well, perfect and holy, right?

That is not the Jesus we meet today. In our Gospel story we see indifferent Jesus, we see prejudiced Jesus, we see, as one commentator has noted, Jesus caught with his compassion down.³

+++

Imagine your child is ill – not in a way that will lead to immediate death, but ill in a way that makes living nearly unbearable. Now imagine that you've heard stories about a man who performs miracles and healings – miracles and healings such as it would take to restore life to your child. What would you do try and catch that miracle?

³ Sharon Ringe.

Would you cross every boundary, barrier, and social norm that stood between you and healing for your precious one?

That was the choice of the Canaanite woman who called out, *Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David.*

Her cry cut across differences in ethnicity, heritage, religion, gender, social marginalization, and accepted social norms for how a woman should behave in public.

She did so not only for a chance for her daughter to be healed, but because she knew and believed something with her whole being: she was fully human and worthy of God's mercy.

In this story of Jesus at his most human, we see him caught up in the human systems of separation and "othering" of his day. We see him play into the animosity between **his** people and **her** people.

It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.

Calling her a dog is equivalent to a racial slur – it was a dehumanizing term – and it was a familiar and favorite insult of the Israelites for the Canaanites.⁴

Yet as uncomfortable as that may make us, remember that the story doesn't end there. Because the woman refused to be humiliated, she persevered through the insult, and outwitted Jesus in verbal sparring as she turned his metaphor back on him.⁵

Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.

⁴ Dock Hollingsworth, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, Homiletical Perspective.

⁵ *Fortress Commentary on the Bible.*

+++

Matthew doesn't tell us, but I feel sure that all of this story has taken place while Jesus was still walking – still staying the course on his mission – while everyone else trailed along.

Until the woman says that. Then I imagine he stops. There is a long pause – long enough to start to become uncomfortable. In my mind's eye I see his head drop forward and his proud posture deflate. He drags in a ragged breath, and then another.

In a split second he sees in his mind's eye the road ahead – the way it will lead to Jerusalem and all that will unfold. His heart is split open as he understands that walking his road has narrowed his vision – that's he's lost sight of God's mission and he's started to live from a place of scarcity rather than the abundant mercy he know knows to be true.

Jesus was big enough not to be ashamed to learn from the Canaanite woman.⁶

He let go of his defensiveness – of what he “knew to be true” – to listen to another perspective, to someone else's experience – and he changed his mind. It turns out the Canaanite woman was just as fully human as he was.

I see Jesus him square his shoulders and turn around. He looks at the woman for the first time – and his eyes hold a million secrets, but gratitude openly.

Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

Kyrie, eleison – Lord, have mercy.

⁶ Jae Won Lee, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, Exegetical Perspective.

+++

This story ends with healing. Healing for the Canaanite woman's daughter, yes, but healing for Jesus as well.

It is all too easy to be weighed down by the divisions in our world – to circle the wagons and declare who is in and who is out – who is right and who is wrong.

What today's Gospel reminds us is that none of us are perfect – not even Jesus. We all fall short and fail to extend God's grace, mercy, and justice as fully as we should. Sometimes we fall prey to limiting compassion. We rush through life without stopping to listen to the cries of our neighbors.

Healing comes not when we're perfect, but when we work every day to sow more grace, mercy and justice. When our lives overflow with compassion. When we open our hearts to hearing different experiences.

And when we, like Jesus, turn around – repent – and be accountable to one another.

That was the gift of the Canaanite woman, she held Jesus accountable for this Gospel he was preaching. May we have ears to hear and eyes to see the Canaanite women among us.

He drew a circle that shut me out—

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But love and I had the wit to win:

We drew a circle that took him in.⁷

~ AMEN ~

⁷ Edwin Markham.