

Being The Outsider

Texts: Genesis 45:1-15

Romans 11:1-2, 29-32 (Series A, 11th Sunday after Pentecost) Ps. 133

Matthew 15: (10- 20) 21-28

Let us pray:

Civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in his famous letter from Birmingham Jail responded to criticisms of the local clergy who charged that he was an *outside agitator* who was stirring up trouble away from his home town. He wrote: *I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."*

The gospel story today really resonates with me, she is my hero. That Canaanite woman, that impure, foreign, woman, that non-Jew, that Gentile. I can imagine the scene - the disciples' rolling eyes and knowing looks of the she's one-of-them sort; their collective groans and oh please expulsions of breath in frustration, and finally asking Jesus to send her away as her shouts were annoying them. Can you see her, too?

She's worrying about her child, seeking the help of the man she knows can work the miracle she and her child seek. Yet in her greatest moment of need, or perhaps because of it, she, of the lowliest stature, risks all to get a response from Jesus who then dismisses her, in effect, telling her she's no better than a dog. According to the thought at the time - this woman was beyond the pale.

- She was a foreigner
- An outsider
- One who did not belong.

The woman from Canaan is the first non-Jewish woman that Jesus deals with in the gospels and - as the story seems to show - there seems to be some reluctance on his part to do so. Some liberal theologians say that at the moment the woman confronted Jesus he extended his divine mission, for the very first time, to those outside of Israel. That, after some thought and reflection - Jesus decided to be the Messiah to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews.

I personally think that this is nonsense - the scriptures are full of passages saying how salvation will proceed from the Jews to the Gentiles - and Jesus was well aware of them. Further, Jesus has already performed a miraculous healing for a Gentile, the Centurion in charge at Capernaum, telling his disciples as he did so

"I say to you many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven..." (Matthew 8:11)

It is clear from the beginning that Jesus had no intention of confining the good news to the Children of Israel. I think that Jesus was testing the disciples the disciples who were so eager to send the Canaanite woman away from Jesus and who in fact begged Jesus to send her away - and yes - I think that perhaps Jesus was testing the woman herself.

I believe that Jesus was trying to make a point about faith - and about the barriers that people place in the way of salvation - barriers of race, barriers of skin colour, barriers of culture, barriers of sex, barriers of wealth, even barriers of morality and religion.

Is not - as it says in Isaiah, the prophet that Jesus quotes the most – *Is not the House of the Lord of Israel, the House of God, to be called a House of Prayer for All Nations? That is the way it supposed to be.* Today's passage does show us that barriers do exist between people, and that those barriers can be overcome.

I want us to look at the story from this vantage point and hope it might speak to each and everyone of us about the faith that overcomes barriers. There are many kinds of barriers that seek to keep the woman from Jesus and the salvation, wholeness, and healing that she seeks.

The most obvious barrier is that fact of her nationality. She is not a Jew. She has no business turning to a Jewish religious leader for help. She does not worship the Jewish God or follow the Jewish religious customs and laws. She, as I said earlier, does not belong. The second barrier is her sex. She is a woman - and despite the record of how many women came to Jesus for help, woman really no business approaching a male religious leader uninvited. These barriers are bad enough - but others are revealed in the story that are equally devastating.

After the woman decides to approach Jesus, after she sees him and calls upon him to heal her daughter, she must deal with his silence. She must overcome the natural reaction that surely welled up within her to simply give up and go away. The master is not responding to her. Then - on top of this - when she persists in crying out she must deal with those closest to Jesus - with the disciples, who try to drive her away and who even go so far as to ask Jesus to send her away.

She must overcome the scorn, the frustration, and dislike of those around her - those who seem to have been told by the master that he has no responsibility towards outsiders like her. And then, at last, when she does get close to the master - when she falls on her knees before him to ask for his help, she must deal with what seems to be an insult - she must swallow whatever pride she may have left and allow herself to be compared to a dog.

Think of it - think of having a real need in your life, and believing that there is someone who can help you with that need, but that person is totally unrelated to you by blood, culture, religion, or race - and in fact comes from a bloodline, culture, religion and race that is opposed to your own. Think of having not only to face this kind of barrier, but also having to face a group of people who are telling you to get lost, and at the same time having to deal with apparent apathy, and hostility from the person whom you are seeking help from, -- and all because of who you are and where you have come from.

But the woman from Canaan she persists despite the barriers between her and Jesus; she continues on despite the obstacles between her and what she believes is will be the source of her daughter's healing - the one whom she calls "Lord" and "The Son of David" - the one she believes is the Messiah of the Jews. She wails and cries out for help she does not get angry and she does not give up. She believes that Jesus can help her and she is persistent and she is humble in her belief, she is clever and she is hopeful in her faith, and in the end she achieves the goal she battled all the barriers to obtain, she receives the life of her daughter - a life free of the demons who were torturing her.

And that is what the story is really all about it is about overcoming the barriers that prevent others, and ourselves, from being made whole. Every person of good sense knows that wholeness comes from God and can only come from God - and from God's special servants. While this woman from Canaan did not know God in the way that those in Israel knew him, she believed that Jesus was special, and though she was an outsider, a foreigner, a woman, she calls him Lord in recognition of this specialness that she sees in him.

She believes in him, and she takes action on the basis of that belief. She holds onto her faith in the face of tenacity,

- she holds onto her faith even though she does not hear an answer from the Lord right away,
- she holds onto her faith despite the barriers raised by others,
- she holds onto her faith even in the face of apparent insult and rejection from the one she believes in.

In the end she receives the reward of faith - salvation comes into her home. What I want to say at this point is that there it is very important to distinguish faith from other kinds of things. When Jesus says to her at the end of the story

- "Woman, great is your faith" What he means is not - great is your persistence
- nor great is your pushiness
- nor even - great is your need

No, what he means is great is the reason you have for being here when your daughter is sick - great is the hope you have in coming to me - great is the trust that led you here and caused you to be persistent, clever, and even a bit pushy.

You see we often confuse faith - the faith that overcomes barriers – with action. And while faith most surely does lead to action, faith itself must be in the forefront to make those actions happen. The woman from Canaan believed in Jesus, she had faith in him, - she believed he could heal, - she believed that he was her hope and he alone, and it was this belief, this faith, that overrode all other concerns it alone gave her the energy to persist in the face of opposition, it alone supplied her with the courage and the audacity that she needed.

- No one will persist who does not believe that it is worth while.
- No one will face insult or injury who does not trust they are on the right path.
- No one will succeed who does not have the faith that their goal can be reached.

We need to remember our faith if we are to overcome barriers and receive wholeness. We need to really believe the word written in This Book, and the word that is written on our hearts - that word that says God is not just the God of Israel, - and God is not just limited to making some people feel good about themselves on a Sabbath evening or a Sunday morning.

In the midst Covid-19 global pandemic, we need to believe that God cares even when it seems God doesn't care. We need to believe that God is life, and love and goodness. And that life is stronger than the mightiest enemy - stronger than death, and that love is greater than the highest wall of prejudice or the most solid barrier of ignorance. And that goodness is meant for all. We need to believe that God is the source of all healing and that he is the fount all of grace that he gives to those in need and listens to those who humble themselves before him and believe in him. My friends - no human barrier can stand before God or before those who call on his name in faith.

God has created us one and all with the free will to make what we can out of our human condition. Some days, some times of life, are clearly better than others for each of us, yet we all are God's chosen children. Fortunately for the human race, God didn't give me or any of us the job of deciding who is the right sort, who is acceptable, or who belongs with the dogs.

When we have faith - when we turn to God as our hope and our life that which we seek we will find. The answer we seek may not come instantly. And the forces of human prejudice and ignorance may try to drive us away. We may even think at times that we hear God telling us we are outsiders - though we would be hearing wrong – But if we hold onto our faith, if we persist in God will help us. This is the message of the story of the Canaanite woman. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord. We are to Give, Forgive, and Believe. Let us seek those crumbs of hope, of faith, of love for it is in the seeking we will find that God's door is always open. **Amen.**

Make melodies in your heart with these hymns:

- Jesus, Jesus, Fill Us with Your Love # 708
- We Are Called # 720
- The Church of Christ, in Every Age # 727

Happy birthday and Happy wedding anniversaries to all individual celebrating this special day in August 2020

Good news: In person worship service will resume on Sunday, September 6 at our regular worship time 11:00 with communion. Please bring your face mask, we will practice social distancing in the sanctuary. Welcome back and be blessed.