

Sermon for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost

Gospel: Matthew 15:21-28

Five summers ago I spent a month during a sabbatical at Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem. As exhilarating as it was to be visiting in Israel and the West Bank, seeing the places where Jesus and his ancestors walked and where the early church began, I was profoundly aware of the volatility in the air. We moved through various checkpoints between Israel and the West Bank. We saw young Israeli soldiers everywhere, including at the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized. The building complex at Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish, located at Tabgha, on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, had just been firebombed. We learned of the intense discrepancies of resources between Israelis and Palestinians, even in something so basic to survival as water. We heard from students at Bethlehem University, an institution run by Christian brothers, who lived quite close physically, but who could never tell whether getting through the checkpoint into Bethlehem would require 45 minutes or a couple of hours. Christian Palestinian employees of Tantur told us of their travel restrictions, needing to leave by a certain time, and unable to drive their cars there. The hills seen through the main gate of Tantur's beautiful campus--once beautiful olive groves--were now covered with the dense housing of illegal Israeli settlements.

As we live through the combination of deprivations and loss born of COVID-19, as well as the aftermath of killings of people of color such as George Floyd and as we confront the history and reality of systemic racism in our country, I wonder if we are not better suited to enter the world of Jesus. I think it's this kind of distrust and volatility that we should read into our gospel; a land like Israel and the West Bank today in which because of historical circumstances people were often ready to snap. Matthew wrote for his own volatile community still in an occupied land several decades after Jesus, in which the City of Jerusalem and their Temple had been destroyed by the occupying power.

As I think about our gospel for today, I think perhaps it's a perfect passage to read if we need to remind ourselves that Jesus is both fully human (and hence rooted in a particular time and place) and fully divine, that he is Emanuel, God with us. But let us consider what the passage says not only about Jesus, but also what it says about the Canaanite woman, and what it suggests about how we are to live our lives today as Christians, as those who follow and pattern our lives upon Jesus.

In her reflection entitled "Embrace," Suzanne Guthrie summarizes this gospel brilliantly.

"She is a woman. A foreigner. A pagan. Unclean.

"He belongs to the chosen people.

"She has means, independence, and a crackling intelligence.

"He is an illegitimate, itinerant rabbi.

"She has a daughter possessed by a demon. *She needs him.*

"He is on a purposeful but limited mission.

"She is everything he most despises and fears.

“He's in for a major breakthrough.”ⁱ

Let's remember that Jesus was a Jew, not a Christian. His initial responses to the shouting woman—a scorned and unclean foreigner to a Jewish man – is shocking but makes sense on multiple levels. Jesus as a Jew regarded himself as chosen by God, called to live a life of holiness and right behavior. His identity involved a sense of being set apart. He lived within a religion and a society in which gender roles were strictly established and enforced. We are not given the reasons for his initial silence – perhaps he was shocked—indeed, on some visceral level, repelled by the woman's urgent demand. Imagine this situation: the energy of a shouting woman reporting her daughter's being tormented by a demon. His disciples, as they often do, were anxious and hence began urging Jesus to do something. Jesus's silence, his stillness, were their own statement. Jesus is a masterful leader in having the capacity to separate himself from the emotional processes which swirl around him and to see situations with clarity and vision.

When Jesus does answer—first his disciples and then the woman, he clearly gives his understanding of his call in a metaphorical way: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” He understood his work as being specific in that respect. He is no doubt aware of the cost of his compassion – again and again he is shown to take time to be apart, even from his disciples, to be in prayer and solitude. How else could he have the energy and focus to feed, to heal, to challenge existing structures of oppression and exclusion, to counsel, to be present with those others would scorn? It is his reply to the woman that is shocking because it feels like such an insult: “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” Is Jesus simply being honest about how he feels, revealing his humanity includes less than perfect moments? Sometimes being honest is being helpful, a cutting quickly to the core rather than an endless dancing around. But then Jesus is clearly affected by the woman's plea: “Lord, help me.” And mercy is what God is about. He is moved by the woman's faith, by the strength of her presence, and by the persuasiveness of her argument. Allowing himself to be led by the Spirit, he gives this amazing affirmation: “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” It's almost a moment of repentance, reorienting himself to God. He heals her daughter in an instant. And in that response of mercy beyond what anyone might rightfully expect, in that holy listening and response, he shows himself most divine.

In this nameless Canaanite woman we have a model of someone able to see beyond her usual view of the world. She knows both her own prejudice and that if her daughter is to be healed, she needs to lay it aside. She is able to see who Jesus is, knowing that he has no obligation to her. Yet she asks clearly for what she needs. She does not give up. The woman recognizes her need for Jesus if her daughter is to be healed and abandons what may be customary and, indeed, acceptable behavior in her urgency. She does not let herself be swayed from her urgent purpose. Emlyn A Ott writes of this nameless woman passing a “relationship checkpoint.” This foreigner is also remarkable because she sees who Jesus is more clearly than many who have lived with him from day to day, enjoying the intimacy of breaking bread with him. Isn't it often true that it takes an outsider to see a situation clearly?

So what difference might this story in the gospel make to our lives as Christians? The story is a powerful one of healing by Jesus. It also illustrates that God's healing, God's love, transcend whatever narrow perspectives we (and even Jesus, in this particular story) may have about their extent and to whom they are rightfully directed. If Jesus can change, can be open to and persuaded by an outsider's faith in him and in his ability to heal her daughter, why cannot we also be open to the possibility that our ministries, our selves, may be moved and changed in startling and uncomfortable ways. God puts others in need, those who may seem

profoundly different from ourselves, in our way so that we may be compassionate, but also because these encounters are also opportunities for us, in helping us to become more fully who we are meant to be.

This gospel is also about how we relate to the other, to those who are different from ourselves. As Peter Marty reminds us: “The pandemic hasn’t taken away our ability to look our neighbor in the eye.”ⁱⁱ Living with openness, with willingness to learn and to be moved and to repent, willingness to communicate in the language of the other, enables us to be more rather than less like Christ and to keep our center on *him*, not our restricted ideas about who he is, and to know more deeply this Jesus who is God with us. I hope we are all ready, like Jesus was, for a breakthrough.

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ⁱ <http://edgeofenclosure.org/proper15a.html>

ⁱⁱ Christiancentury.org [August 14, 2020.]