



Proper 15 / A  
“Seeking the Faith of a Canaanite”  
16 August 2020

Isaiah 56:1-8; Psalm 67, 45b; Romans 11:1-2a,29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

Well, it’s not difficult for us to find some comfort in this story!

What good news to hear that even the Son of God can have an occasional bad day! A day when he’s just not himself!

Or perhaps the take-away message is: Blessed are the party crashers, the persistent, the outspoken, and the pushy and aggressive; for they shall surely be noticed – though not always in a good way!

But, somehow, I don’t think these are the lessons we are supposed to take away from this morning’s Gospel . . .

Everyone knows she has no business being there. She doesn't belong there. Jesus knows this. The disciples know this. The woman herself knows this. . . . A foreigner, an outsider . . . She shouldn't be there.

This woman from Canaan, what is modern-day Lebanon . . . This woman is the first non-Israelite, non-Jewish woman that Jesus encounters in the Gospels, and – as the story clearly shows – there is some reluctance on his part to do so. Jesus' response to this woman is, frankly, quite proper for a Jewish rabbi. But, from our non-Jewish, our Christian - our 21<sup>st</sup>-century, politically correct – our “also-Gentile-therefore-sympathetic-to-this-poor-woman” – our heightened sensitivity to any hint of racism – from all of our perspectives, this is a most improper response, especially from the Son of God. How, we ask, can he treat her – treat us! – so dismissively, so very rudely?

Some biblical commentators say that in this confrontation we see the moment when Jesus realizes that his mission is to be expanded to include all of God's children, not just to the Jewish nation. After some divine deliberation, it seems – hence his extended silence at the beginning of the encounter with the woman – Jesus is convinced to be not just the Jewish Messiah, but the Messiah to the non-Jewish world as well. And, as non-Jews, we are most grateful for that.

But, the Hebrew Scriptures are filled with passages saying how salvation will begin with the Jews, but then spread throughout the whole world and to all peoples. And Jesus – as all Jews of his time – knew these Scriptures well.

As we heard this morning, even Isaiah, the biblical prophet whom Jesus quotes most often, says: “my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

Salvation – a return to the full grace of our Creator – entry into the new Kingdom of God – is to be available to all God’s children. Isaiah knew it. Jesus knew it. The disciples knew it. All faithful Jews knew it. And so, it seems, did this Gentile woman know it . . . and wish to claim it.

Salvation made available to all God’s children! That was to be the way of the restored Creation, God’s new Kingdom on earth.

“Ah, what a wonderful ideal! But here in the real world, the Kingdom has yet to arrive.” That was the argument then. It is an argument, or rather an excuse – even among Christians – that can still be heard today.

But Jesus tells his followers: In me, the Kingdom of God has come among you. The disciples apparently didn’t understand the fullness and richness of what that meant – for them, or for the world, or for all people. And sadly, too often, all these centuries later, neither do we.

Jesus uses this unlikely encounter to make two points: a point about faith; and a point about the false barriers that people, even faithful people, place in the way of others seeking God’s salvation – barriers of race, barriers of culture, barriers of class, barriers of gender, barriers of wealth, barriers of morality and religion, even Christian denomination.

This encounter with the Gentile woman may or may not be a wake-up call for Jesus to expand his mission. But this out-of-the-ordinary, out-of-the-comfort-zone encounter is, most definitely, a wake-up call for those loyal disciples who were so eager to defend their religious beliefs and traditions by sending this woman away. It is a wake-up call to anyone who arrogantly sets barriers and self-righteously names themselves as gate-keepers for entry into God’s new world order and the salvation of God in Christ. In the world today, in our nation today, even in the Church today, this is a wake-up call for us . . . if we will only hear it.

There is much to ponder in this rather strange Gospel story, but . . .

- however we may interpret the silence of Jesus when first confronted by the woman . . .
- whatever we may think about the comment he makes to the disciples about the lost sheep of Israel . . .
- whatever we may make of his comment about how it is not fair to throw the children's bread to the dogs . . .

Regardless of all that, this morning's Gospel reading does show that unfair and unjust barriers based in fear and superstition, often steeped in tradition, do exist between people, and that those barriers can, and will – and must! – be overcome.

There are many kinds of barriers that should keep this woman from Jesus and the salvation she seeks. The most obvious barriers are her nationality, her religion, and the fact that she is a woman. For all these reasons, in 1<sup>st</sup>-century Jewish culture, she is an outsider, and all laws and customs and traditions insist that she remain so.

These most obvious barriers are bad enough – but others, while more subtle, are equally devastating: the rebuke of Jesus' initial silent ignoring of the woman and her request; the rebuff of the disciples attempt to drive her away; and finally, to be verbally insulted so cruelly. And her desperate actions that compel her to seek out a foreign Jewish rabbi make her an outsider in her own Canaanite culture as well. So now, completely alone, she swallows whatever little pride she may have left, even allowing herself to be compared to a dog.

Jesus isn't the only one in this story having a bad day!

Surely, the natural reaction for most of us, having suffered such reproach, would be to simply give up and go away, perhaps throwing some insults of our own over our shoulder as we depart.

But this woman doesn't react as most of us would. And in her actions and response lies the key to the Gospel message.

The Kingdom ain't here yet! It's a nice ideal, a nice image for dreamers, but not very realistic for those of us living life in the real world. This is obvious from the story. It is still obvious in the world today. Just look around . . . Barriers do exist. Rules and laws and traditions and customs still define us. Prejudice and injustice and hate and oppression are still evident and tolerated, even supported and endorsed. The promised peaceful and inclusive Kingdom of God quite obviously has not yet arrived. We know that now. The disciples knew that then.

But this woman doesn't.

Of all the characters in the story, she – this unlikely biblical hero: a Canaanite, a foreigner, a Gentile, a woman, someone who refuses to know and keep her place – she will not be rebuffed, or put off, or denied, even by the Son of God . . .

She is the real person of faith in this story. For she is the only one who realizes – and proclaims – and reacts to the truth that in Jesus the new Kingdom of God has, in fact, come into the world. This unlikely hero understands that in Jesus, this man who now stands before her, the world is changed and all barriers to healing and salvation - for all people – are destroyed in this universal Messiah, this Jesus, this Son of God come among us.

That is what this story is really all about. It is about seeking and finding life – eternal life. It is about confronting and overcoming the artificial

barriers that prevent others, and ourselves, and all God's children, from being made whole.

Ultimately, this story is about the injustice and ungodliness of human prejudice. And it is about belief – constant, unwavering faith that, even in the face of seemingly impenetrable, long-held, strongly reinforced barriers, will not be denied.

The Kingdom ain't here yet! And we know it! Just look around!

But this unnamed woman didn't see the world that way . . . for she saw something new – someone new – had come into the world . . . and in Jesus, she knew that her world was forever changed! She knew that the new Kingdom had come! And she knew that she was included!

Here in this unlikely biblical hero, this unnamed Canaanite woman, the ultimate outsider . . . Here is our patron saint – for here is the one who shows us what happens:

- when we believe that God always listens and answers prayers – even when God seems silent . . .
- shows us what happens when we believe that God is life – and that the life we are offered in Jesus is stronger even than death...
- when we believe that God is love – and that the unconditional love God gave to the world in Christ is the love we are now to offer to others . . .
- shows us what happens when we believe that God's goodness is meant for all people – even when we don't understand why or how, or judge them to be undeserving . . .
- when we believe that God is the source of all healing and the giver of all grace . . .
- when we believe that no human barrier can stand before God . . .

When we can have that depth and persistence of faith, then we, like our Canaanite sister, will know and proclaim – in our words, in our actions, in our relationships, in our lives – that in Christ, God’s Kingdom has come . . . come to us . . . and come to the world.

Ultimately, this is the real message of this morning’s Gospel.

Ultimately, this is the really Good News of Jesus Christ.

Amen.