

Sunday, August 16, 2020
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 15 (Year A)

Matthew 15.21-28

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/524886064522726/videos/608161829886449>

(Sermon begins at about 13:00)

“Engaging Otherness”

Struggles with how we think about and interact with those who are perceived as “other” is nothing new. It is not just something that has been brought to light in the aftermath of the murders of George Floyd or Breonna Taylor. It is not something that was brought to light with the Emancipation Proclamation or the abolition of slavery. It is something we have been struggling with as human beings for as long as we can remember. As part of the human story, it is something that no human is immune to. It’s just that the categories of classification, the nuances of engaging “otherness,” have changed over time.

As we see in our Gospel reading for today, even Jesus sometimes struggled with how to engage those who were “other”—particularly those who were outside his own cultural and religious group. He and the disciples are traveling in the region of Tyre and Sidon, which was Gentile territory. They are approached by a Canaanite woman who somehow knows who Jesus is—not that it is really that important how she knew. What is important is the fact that she did know who Jesus was—that he was of a different ethnic and religious background than she. Because of her dire circumstances—the fact that her daughter is tormented by a demon—she seems to view Jesus as her last hope for relief. Out of desperation, she breaks so many social conventions in approaching Jesus. And in the way she approaches him. Knowing who Jesus was, that he was a Jewish teacher, she certainly would have known that her approaching him would be an affront. Actually, a triple whammy of an affront. That Jewish holy men, out of concerns for ritual purity, did not have direct contact with those of different ethnic groups, those of different religions, and unknown women. Then throw in the fact that her daughter was possessed by a demon. With these four strikes, she should not have even thought about approaching Jesus. But approach him she did. And not in the most socially gracious manner. She yells out to him, making a scene. This in and of itself would have been a breaking of social convention. Yelling to get Jesus’ attention would have been improper behavior, violating social norms. The disciples urge Jesus not to engage her, but merely send her away. This would have been the appropriate thing to do. To not dignify the woman’s inappropriate behavior by responding.

Nonetheless, Jesus does choose to engage the woman. He responds with “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt 15.24). What? Did Jesus just refuse to help this woman? Apparently. And the reasoning is because he was sent to minister to Jews and she is obviously not Jewish. Where is the compassion and mercy that we associate with Jesus? Where is the unconditional love and acceptance?

And when the woman persists in her plea for help, Jesus kicks it up a notch. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (Mt 15.26). He uses a slur against the woman. Implying in no uncertain terms that in his eyes, she is not worthy of being treated as human,

but rather that she is to be treated like a dog. An animal not worthy of human consideration. This is so unlike the Jesus that we know. How could he demean her like that? Again, where is the unconditional love and acceptance that we associate with Jesus?

As much as we don't like to think about the implications of Jesus' statement to the Canaanite woman, there it is, in black and white, right there in the Bible. And maybe particularly right now, as our own nation struggles with issues of racial justice and discrimination, with the denial of equality and justice because of race or ethnicity, this passage does not so much speak to us as it cries out for attention. Just as did the Canaanite woman.

The Church has always had a hard time with this passage of scripture, precisely because of what it implies. Precisely because it portrays a Jesus that is inconsistent with our understanding of him. Some have attempted to downplay the insult of the term "dog," implying that the term was really meant to be more like "puppy," a cuddly term of endearment. Dogs were not pets in Jesus' time and culture. They were dirty animals, no two ways about it. Some have attempted to explain the encounter as a test of the woman's humility and faith. But that's a pretty cruel way to do it. Others have suggested that Jesus was using the encounter as a way of somehow teaching or testing his disciples. Yet there is no follow-up as would be expected in such a situation.

Maybe, just maybe, the encounter was precisely what it appears to be. What we tend to forget is that Jesus was not only divine. He was also human. He was born into a human family. He was born into a human culture. He was born into a human religion. He was the product of his cultural and religious upbringing. And frankly, the Jewish religion and culture was all about being God's Chosen People, and all that went with it. That they were to remain separate from others, from Gentiles, to maintain their racial and religious purity. And not only that. There was a great deal of animosity between the Jewish people and the Canaanites. A little over a thousand years before, after the Exodus, the Jewish people came in and took over the land which had been occupied by the Canaanites. So, there was an ancient hatred between these two people based on arguments of whose land this really was. They generally viewed each other with contempt and often referred to each other with derogatory slurs such as "dog." This would have been the worldview that Jesus had lived with for 30 years.

Based on where this story falls in Matthew's Gospel, this encounter with the Canaanite woman would have been early in Jesus' public ministry. Perhaps he was still trying to figure out what his ministry was. Perhaps he was still trying to get a handle on God's universal values and how they were to be applied, particularly to those who were outside the Jewish religious and cultural milieu. It is reasonable to assume that Jesus' understanding of his mission was still a work in progress. And that the Canaanite woman was to be a teacher in Jesus' education and understanding of his own mission and ministry.

After Jesus' unfortunate use of a slur, the woman boldly responds, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (Mt 15.27). Bazinga! The Canaanite woman has made her point beautifully. And Jesus immediately gets the message. Whether he knew it or not, he had been engaged in an internal struggle between the limited doctrines of his religion and an expansiveness he felt in his heart and his soul. He realizes that he had been operating out of a limited, human perspective. Thanks to the Canaanite woman who was willing to challenge him, his eyes have been opened and he now has a better and broader

understanding of God's vision and of his own place within that vision. "Woman, great is your faith!" (Mt 15.28a). His encounter with the Canaanite woman opened the way for Jesus' and the future church's ministry to Gentiles. Opened the way for ministry not just to the Jewish people, but to all people.

This story would have been particularly important to Matthew's original audience, which was primarily Jewish. It would have sent a message about the nature of Jesus' mission and ministry and how that was being reflected in the growing church. That it was open to everyone, Jew and Gentile alike. That all are equal in God's sight and that all are welcomed. And for those early Jewish Christians, it would have been helpful to see Jesus make his own journey of understanding. To see how a man who was raised Jewish, just as they were, could come to a broader, more expansive, understanding of God's vision and make the necessary change in perspective. To live into that broader understanding. And if he could do it, if he could expand his vision, maybe they could, too.

Occasionally we bump up against something in the scriptures that is inconsistent with our image or understanding of who Jesus is. Things that can make us a little uncomfortable. Today's Gospel passage is one of those. Yet, the beauty of such passages is that they reveal the true humanity of Jesus. They reveal that—the whole Son of God things aside—Jesus was like us. He struggled with the same things we do. And bringing the Son of God thing back into the picture, that's why God became incarnate in the form of Jesus. To experience life as we do. To experience firsthand the same struggles we do. That there is nothing that we do not experience or struggle with that God through his Son has not already experienced or struggled with. In this way, he can help us through those struggles.

This Gospel passage, and the story of Jesus' own struggles with how to engage those who are perceived as "other" is certainly timely to our own lives of faith. For almost three months, our nation has experienced protests revolving around struggles with what it means to engage those viewed as other. Not that they should have been viewed as other in the first place, but that's where we are, so that's what we have to deal with. That's what we have to work on. Jesus, in this passage, shows us what that work looks like. That our views and perspectives are not the only ones. That our views and perspectives are not even the right ones. That ours are not the only experiences of life in our society. That some have very different experiences than we do, and not in a good way. That some, like the Canaanite woman, are so desperate to be seen and heard not as other, but as equal—as sister, as brother.

And that's what Jesus did. He listened to her as if she truly mattered. He attempted to understand her perspective. He attempted to understand her experience. But most importantly, he saw her with new eyes. He saw her for who she truly was. That she was a beloved child of God, worthy of the same love and compassion, worthy of the same respect and dignity, that everyone desires. Worthy of the same love and compassion, worthy of the same respect and dignity, that God desires—that God commands—for all his beloved children. Just as Jesus discovered based on his encounter with one who he once viewed as "other," it is only through our willingness to listen with open hearts and open minds, to see with new eyes the divine truth that all are God's beloved children, that healing will be made possible.