

August 17, 2008
8:30 AM

Genesis 45:1-15
Psalm 133
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32
MATTHEW 15:21-28

“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” Matthew 15:28
(NRSV)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the things that I have appreciated most about being the Formation Director for the Province of the Americas of the Third Order, Society of Saint Francis, has been the opportunity to travel to a number of different places and meet and hear some remarkable people. They have taught me a great deal. Last weekend I had such a privilege. I was at the Western Convocation that was held just outside of Vancouver, British Columbia. The presenter was a member of the Order, The Right Rev. Mark MacDonald, the Anglican Church of Canada’s Bishop of Indigenous Ministries. Prior to assuming that position, Mark was Bishop of Alaska, and prior to that he was in charge of the Episcopal Church’s ministries in Navajoland. He had just returned from the Lambeth Conference where he had been one of the speakers.

He spoke of what he had learned from his long ministry with indigenous people and how it had changed his understanding of the Gospel and faith. He covered a number of topics. I cannot begin to relate them all here since he took over four hours, but one point he made I want to use to frame my sermon today.

His point was that we must change our way of approaching scripture. Too often, today we either use it as a weapon to find an answer and proof we can use to beat up on those with whom we disagree, or we use historical/scientific methods to try to determine the precise, absolute meaning so that we will know exactly what we are to believe or do.

Instead he suggested that we need to adapt the approach of many indigenous peoples and engage scripture in a way that opens our minds, causes us to think and see things from a new perspective. One way they engage their sacred stories and scriptures comes from their deep roots in nature, the four directions. It leads them to look at all situations and stories from different perspectives—at least four, representing north, south, east and west.

Today I would like to look at our Gospel lesson from four ways—not to give you answers but to try to get you to look at it and your faith in new ways.

We have to be operating at a very superficial level for today’s Gospel lesson not to challenge our understanding of Jesus and for us not to be disturbed by it. From our earliest days most of us have been taught that Jesus was God; he was perfect; everything he did was right; he was the perfect example of who we should be; he was always loving and willing to help, etc. Here Jesus first ignores the woman. Then he tells her that he was not sent to minister to her kind. Then he calls her and her kind “dogs”. This is rude

behavior that we would not consider appropriate for our children, our friends, our clergy or ourselves.

What is going on here? We really are not sure because so much of communication is culturally based and non-verbal. Although we have some understanding of the culture, it remains a foreign and ancient culture for us, and our understanding of it is very limited. And we are totally lacking any knowledge of the facial expressions and other body language that would help us to understand the exchange more fully. But however we interpret this passage, it must challenge a lot of the images and thoughts we have about Jesus. I can only speak for myself, but somewhere deep inside of me is a basic view of Jesus that keeps popping up that sees him as static—sort of like Athena popping out of the head of Zeus fully grown and developed. The Jesus that we meet here defies our attempts to turn him into a plaster saint who came fully developed from his mother's womb. The question "What would Jesus do?" could be a bit embarrassing if we reference this passage. Did Jesus believe that he was sent only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel?" If so, was Jesus being challenged and possibly changed here? When we say that Jesus was human and divine, do we mean that he learned and developed just as we do? If so, what does Jesus' humanity mean to us and for our humanity? How does his divinity teach, heal, and make us?

This woman, who was viewed by most Jews of Jesus' time as an outcast, unclean, indigenous person who was hardly worth acknowledging, suddenly appears as a hero of faith and a person with a great ministry. Her first ministry is on behalf of her daughter. She comes to Jesus out of a deep and abiding love for her daughter and an unstoppable desire to find wholeness and healing for her. In this, she is very human and like a number of mothers I know who are willing to give all for their children.

Nevertheless, her following of them and her loud, persistent calling to Jesus embarrassed the disciples. They just wanted her to go away and leave them alone. They did not want to be seen with her. They did not want people, even total strangers, to get the wrong idea about whom they associated with and what they were about. Doesn't she know that her very presence and her actions could make them look bad? She makes them uncomfortable. And yet, before this encounter was complete, she had emerged as a hero of faith.

Jesus' words do not strike us as much better. Matthew seems to be saying that she ministered to Jesus by expanding his understanding of his mission. She does not seem to have embarrassed Jesus by her calling and insistent call for her daughter's healing. But he does not just gladly embrace her and grant her wish that he heal her daughter. She witnesses to Jesus, and to us, that God's saving power and love is for all people. By the way she addressed Jesus and by her request, we know that she has heard of Jesus and his miraculous cures. She addresses him as "Lord" and "Son of David", messianic titles. She gives to him honor and homage that most of his own people will not give to him.

But in the end, she does not give a fig about a chosen, correct or proper people. Her daughter is possessed by a demon, and she knows that Jesus can heal her. Jesus' ministry is expanded to one who is not of the house of Israel. Incidentally, in this encounter she provides one more support for Paul and others' conviction that the gospel

should be proclaimed to Gentiles as well as Jews. As Krister Stendahl, former Dean of the Harvard Divinity School and Bishop of Stockholm once suggested, we are merely “honorary Jews.” And this passage suggests that this woman must in some way share in that being so.

The faith that she shows us is not just a doctrinal faith such as we will soon proclaim in our recitation of the Nicene Creed. Neither is it just flattery being used to manipulate Jesus to get something she wants. The faith that this Canaanite woman shows is persistent, courageous, sharp witted and will not be stopped. She is not of the “house of Israel”, but she will not be denied. She knows that Jesus can heal her daughter, and she will persist until he has!

So who are the one’s who are nagging us to expand our understanding of faith and ministry? Who are the one’s who if they approach us on the street or come into our place of worship will embarrass us? What have they to teach us? What have we to learn? Who does God love that we are called to love? This woman challenged Jesus. How does she challenge us?

As I have said, the woman’s faith was not an intellectual assent, and it certainly was not passive. She confronts Jesus. When he ignores her, she does not let him off. When he tries to turn her away, she will not go. When Jesus puts her down, she, with seeming good humor, responds. How often do we see faith as assent, as somewhat passive, as a matter of being good and obedient? How often do we get the message that it is dangerous to argue with God? How often are we taught that if we are good Christians we will not argue with or challenge authority figures? How often do our prayers end up being along the line of “Dear God, if you notice me and happen to think it OK, would you do so and so? If not, it’s OK.” Jesus’ prayer in the Garden, “Thy will, not mine be done” should be a part of our faith. But this woman shows us another side of faith. By the way, she may be the center of our focus today, but also take a look at Abraham, Moses and others who were convinced that their concerns and faith were of importance and that they could influence God. They were willing to risk all for their faith, and they like her were persistent. Faith is not passive. It is not weak. It is strong. It risks. It does not give up easily. And above all, it does not believe that God does not care or will not respond. Perhaps as well as asking “What would Jesus do?” we need to ask “What would faith like that of the Canaanite woman’s look like now?”

“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” Finally, however you interpret the first part of the passage, Jesus did respond. The woman’s faith and persistence were not in vain. Jesus healed her daughter. God is faithful. Jesus is faithful. When we go to Jesus in faith and prayer, he responds.

Amen.

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