

**August 16, 2020**

**20th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**Year A**

**“All You Need is Faith”**

**When Jesus encounters the districts of Tyre and Sidon is was the only time that he was outside of Jewish territory. This passage foreshadows the going out of the gospel to the whole world; it shows us the beginning of the end of all barriers.**

**Jesus is the one who has left Jewish territory and invaded this woman’s world. This Canaanite woman being an unclean outsider demonstrates that she has a better grasp of Jesus’ identity than the disciples that Jesus selected do at this time.**

**This was a time of deliberate time of withdrawal. The end was coming near, and he wished some time of quiet when he could prepare for the end. It wasn’t that he wanted to prepare himself but wanted time to start preparing the disciples for the day of the cross. There were things he wanted to tell them and what he must compel them to understand.**

**In Palestine there really wasn’t any place to have privacy. The crowds were always following him. So, he goes north where at least for a time, he would be safe from the hostility of the scribes and Pharisees, and from the dangerous popularity of the people. It was possible that no Jew would follow him into Gentile territory.**

**Even in a foreign place, Jesus was not free from the demand of human need which cried out to him. There was a woman who had a daughter who was seriously ill. This child afflicted with a demon. The passage never tells of Jesus performing any signs of healing before he met this woman, but it is remarkable that enough word of Jesus had spread through to this region that this woman would somehow know who Jesus is.**

**The woman greets Jesus as the “Son of David”. Her recognition is all the more remarkable because even the disciples have been a bit slow in recognizing who Jesus really was. After Jesus walking on the sea, they do recognize Jesus as the Son of God, but it is not until 16:16 that Peter declares Jesus as Messiah. But this woman, this unclean Canaanite woman hails Jesus as the Son of David, begs for his mercy, and implores his power over a demon that has possessed her daughter. How is it possible that this woman has more insight into Jesus’ identity than his disciples?**

**At first, Jesus seemed to pay no attention to her. He ignored her. I couldn’t believe that when I read ‘But he answered her without a word.’ He just walks past her without even looking at her...But he refuses to send her away. The disciples are embarrassed by this. They tell Jesus ‘Give her what she wants and be rid of her.’ Their reaction isn’t one of compassion, to them she was a nuisance, and all they wanted was to be rid of her as quickly as possible. To be rid of a nuisance may be a common enough reaction; but it is very different from the response of Christian love and pity and compassion.**

**‘Jesus was moved with compassion for this woman, not for a moment can we doubt that. But she was a Gentile, not only a Gentile, she belonged to the old Canaanite stock, and the Canaanites were the ancestral enemies of the Jews. And what does Jesus say not once but twice: ‘I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel.’ The ‘house of Israel’ has provided Jesus with more work than one laborer could feasibly handle. The need in Israel is indeed great.’ (1)**

**Perhaps Jesus’ refusal to listen to the disciples gave the woman hope that her request would be heard. There are things about this woman that we must take note of:**

**First and foremost she had love. As Johann Bengel, an eighteenth-century German Theologian said of her, ‘She made the**

**misery of her child her own.’ Pagan she might be, but in her heart, there was that love for her child which is always the reflection of God’s love for his children. It was love which made her approach this stranger; it was love which made her accept his silence and yet still appeal; it was love which made her suffer the apparent rebuffs.**

**This woman had faith. It was a faith which grew in contact with Jesus. She began by calling him ‘Son of David’; which was a popular title, a political title. It was a title which looked on Jesus as a great and powerful wonder-worker, but which looked on him in terms of earthly power and glory.’**

**So when Jesus at last turned to her: ‘It is not right to take the children’s bread and to throw it to pet dogs.’ To call a person a dog was a deadly and an insult. In those days, the dogs were the unclean scavengers of the street.**

**When calling a person a dog there are two things to remember, the tone, and the look which a thing is said make all the difference. I can call my cousin Bryant, with smile and a tone ‘an old dog’ after he says something funny about his past. Knowing that he knows I say it with affection. We can be quite sure that the smile on Jesus’ face and the compassion in his eyes robbed the words of all insult and bitterness.**

**But these were not street dogs, they were little household pets. They were very different from the stray dogs that roamed the streets and probed in the refuse heaps.**

**‘The woman was a Greek; she was quick to see, and she had all a Greek’s wit. ‘True” she said, ‘but even the dogs get their share of the crumbs which fall from their master’s table.’ Jesus eyes lit up with joy at such an indomitable faith. She came asking a favor of one whom she took to be a great and powerful man. She ended up calling Jesus ‘Lord’.**

**Jesus compelled her to look at himself, and in him she saw something that was not expressible in earthly terms at all but was nothing less than divine. That is precisely what Jesus wanted to awaken in her before he granted her request. He wanted her to see that a request to a great man must be turned into a prayer to the living God. We can see this woman's faith growing as she is confronted with Christ, until she glimpsed him. However distantly, for what he was.'** (2)

**Continued from Johann Begel:**

**This woman's faith was a faith which worshipped. She began by following, she ended upon her knees. She began with a request; she ended with a prayer. Whenever we come to Jesus, we must come first with adoration of his majesty, and only then with the statement of our own need.**

**This woman had indomitable persistence. She was undiscourageable. So many people, it has been said, pray really because they do not wish to miss a chance. They do not really believe in prayer; they have only the feeling that something might just possibly happen. This woman came because Jesus was not just a possible helper; he was her only hope. She came with a passionate hope, a burning sense of need and a refusal to be discouraged. She had the one supremely effective quality in prayer-she was in deadly earnest. Prayer for her was no ritual form; it was the outpouring of the passionate desire of her soul, which somehow felt that she could not-must not-need not-take no for an answer.**

**This woman had the gift of cheerfulness. She was in the midst of trouble; she was passionately in earnest; and yet she could smile. She had a certain sunny heartedness about her. God loves the cheerful faith, the faith in whose eyes there is always the light of hope, faith with a smile which can light the gloom.'**

**Among all the stories we are given to help us understand who Jesus is and how he was and is at work in the world, this one has to be one of the hardest to comprehend. And while countless scholars have tried to explain this away by suggesting that Jesus' tone was joking or that he was setting his disciples up to learn, I am not entirely convinced. I cannot help but wonder if Jesus was also learning as he went if he was also discerning his mission one step at a time. Even as we are called to do. Even as individually and together, we are all called to do.**

**Hearing it in this way, while still powerfully disturbing, this is the most life-giving understanding I can take with me. For if Jesus was just feeling his way forward with some basic tenets or principles to guide him on his way, what is to say this is not also so for all of us?**

**It seems to me there is freedom in this.**

**And that within this there is some inherent encouragement to take a step forward and then perhaps to step to the side or even backwards from time to time as we listen and learn better and deeper.**

**This is at least part of the take-away for me this week.**

**And as a result, there is also this:**

**Just as was the case with Jesus, perhaps it is also so for us that God's vision for who and what and where we are called to be is far greater than what we before imagined, or experienced, or perhaps dared to hope. Until now. Until the crying needs of the world have come home.**

**For surely, we hear this even now in Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman. Prior to this moment, it was apparently enough for him to have come only 'to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'**

**To my understanding, her desperate, tenacious plea pushes him to recognize that the gifts of God were then (and are now) meant for far more than even Jesus was first led to believe. And certainly for far more than you and I before believed or experienced as well.**

**So this is where I am landing now:**

**That COVID-19 here the numbers are edging up, but not too alarmingly yet. As a result, it seems:**

**Some area schools have decided to start out the year remotely.**

**Others are opting for all day, every day in person learning.**

**Some are somewhere in between.**

**In a similar way:**

**Some congregations are back in person together.**

**Others are opting to meet in parking lots and outdoors.**

**Still others are staying fully on-line for the time being.**

**No matter what our choices have been so far though, it would seem that just about everyone is eager for the day when things will be back to where they were before. Or if they will ever be where they were before. I know that in past weeks I have thought of how much I miss all that was. And I know I am not alone in this.**

**And, yet. And yet, as I was standing still in our current situation this week. As I was trying to discern how God has worked before and how God always promises to work yet again, even perhaps here and now when the fear and anxiety is running deep and the losses are piling up, it occurred to me that God's vision for what will be is always bigger than our own. Just as Jesus realized when he finally granted healing to the Canaanite woman's daughter.**

**Indeed, what if what God has in mind for us is far broader and**

**deeper than only going back to the way things were before? Could this be one of those times when our vision has also been far too small?**

**Specifically, I am wondering these days if our hope of ‘getting back to the way things were’ is nowhere near large enough. I am wondering if our vision of getting back to ‘in person worship’ was not nearly as large as the hope God has for us and for God’s beloved world.**

**Beyond that, I am not at all certain of where God’s response to this wondering may lead, so for now at least I am simply posing it to you. And to me. And to all of us together. Can our faith in God’s vision for us be as great as the Canaanite woman’s faith in Jesus?**

**What if God envisions something more than what has been? Will your faith allow you trust in God’s purpose for us?**

**What do you think?**

***Pastor Karen***

- (1) The Gospel of Matthew Professor William Barclay**
- (2) Commentary Working Preacher**