

**Proper 15A, August 16, 2020, St. Anne's
Genesis 45:1-15; Ps 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28**

Today's gospel story is a challenging one because in it Jesus says things that are, well, the only word that seems to fit is - racist. We generally expect Jesus to always be loving and kind. But the truth is the gospels do **not** portray him as always being a loving, "bring the children and lambs to me" kind of Messiah. And this is one of those cases. Now, this story has been explained in various ways to try to make Jesus *look better* in this encounter. Like insisting that Jesus is merely testing this woman's faith. But, while I have **no** problem seeing the Jesus made known to us in the gospels *gladly* testing the faith of a pompous, self-righteous, person of power and entitlement - it seems entirely out of character for him to do so with a desperate mother whose child is tormented. Or, people sometimes argue that Jesus was really just 'teasing' her or using this as a teaching moment for the disciples and didn't 'mean' what he said. But *even* if that's true, calling someone by a racial slur - and in his culture that's what calling her a dog was - is not exactly a very *kind* or *effective* way of teaching someone **else** *not* to be racist or nasty. So perhaps the simplest explanation is the true one - Jesus grew in his own understanding on this day. We often focus on the 'divine side' of Jesus and think this means he must have been *perfect* and 'unchanging' and so **never** had to learn or grow in his understanding. But the church has **always** affirmed Jesus was *fully human* as well as fully divine. And *humans* need to learn and grow and change - it's part of how we're made. So, I think this story shows us the *human* side of Jesus - a human who is challenged as we are and moreover is *not* ashamed to correct himself. This is a story about breaking boundaries and what results when we do.

Jesus' initial response to the Canaanite woman is *entirely typical* for a Jewish man of his time. Part of Jesus' humanity is that he, like all of *us*, is a product of a particular

cultural time and place. So, while we'd often like to pretend that the culture he grew up in is completely unrelated to how Jesus interacted with the world, the gospels show us that isn't true. Just like **we** have to work to overcome **our** cultural assumptions, stereotypes and prejudices, this story indicates the historical Jesus also had to struggle to come to terms with the negative aspects of growing up as a first century Jewish male.

The woman in this encounter is a Canaanite: one of the pagan descendants of the original inhabitants of the land of Israel who were pushed out when the Children of Israel settled the land. Roughly equivalent to our own First Nations people here in Canada. As a Jewish man, Jesus would not normally have had *anything* to do with a Canaanite and especially not a Canaanite **woman**. But despite this cultural taboo, after initially ignoring her, he does engage in debate with her. The woman is persistent. She *refuses* to be deterred by Jesus' initial reluctance, nor by the disciple's irritation and demands he send her away. She perseveres in her conviction that Jesus *can*, and **will**, do for her what she desperately wants and needs. And *eventually* he lets go of his cultural baggage and *does*.

I think this story invites us to challenge our *own* prejudices and assumptions. It is a human trait to tend to consider those different from us in some way, like religion, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status or sexual orientation, as 'the other'. We see this in an **extreme** form in people like the neo-Nazi, white supremacists that still turn up in the news with distressing frequency - but it's true to a greater or lesser extent for **all** of us. It's easy to look at the ugly *extremes* and say 'thank God, **I'm** not like **that!**' And I would hope that no-one at St. Anne's is indeed 'like that'! But, no matter who we are or where our cultural formation occurred we all have prejudices of one form or another. We all have both conscious and unconscious

expectations of how some ‘others’ are less worthy – regardless of whether their ‘otherness’ is the result of their ethnic origin or their economic status or homelessness or intellectual ability or any of the thousands of ways we differ from one another. One of the things this story challenges us to ask ourselves is, who are the Canaanites for **us**? Who might **we** like to ignore or send away? Of course, we like to *think* we’re open and welcoming to *everybody* - but really that’s just not true. More often than not, *regardless* of our own cultural or racial background, we’re like the disciples – disapproving of those who don’t fit **our** standards. And if you think I’m wrong about that... think how we might respond if say, members of Organized Crime or someone who is *overtly* racist decided they wanted to join St. Anne’s. Do you *really* think we’d welcome them with open arms? Especially if they showed no *intention* of disavowing their criminal activities or their vile beliefs? Now, I’m **not** saying we *should* welcome people who espouse hate into our community, or that racist beliefs aren’t vile – they are. But we need to be clear about where our own boundaries *are* between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and how *much* they’re based on **real** and *important* differences in **values** – real and important values we’re willing to *fight to protect* - and how much they’re simply based on cultural norms and expectations or stereotypes. Or on our own *preferences* and desires.

In her time and place, this Canaanite woman crosses the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’ when she *risks* reaching out to someone whom she would reasonably *expect* to reject her. And in doing so she engages Jesus in a contest of wills that allows **him** to cross that boundary with her. She invites him to change and grow in his understanding of just *who* he’s called to help. And *for this*, Jesus calls her a person of great faith.

Too often we think that ‘great faith’ means doing something big, like walking on water or moving mountains. But this woman of "great faith" did neither. She saw in Jesus something that, perhaps, even Jesus didn't yet see in himself. This Canaanite woman trusted that Jesus could and **would** give her daughter the chance at life that *all* mothers want for their child. Her unrelenting campaign to find an end to her daughter's torment forces Jesus to recognize her as one he **has** been sent to serve. The courage she demonstrates in setting aside her own sense of identity, her refusal to accept being rejected not only led to her daughter's healing, but revealed to Jesus another layer of meaning behind *his own teachings*.

In a sense, this is Jesus’ own *awakening*, one that takes him far beyond the first-century Palestine "honour culture" he was raised in. And to his *credit*, Jesus **doesn't** try to ‘save face’ when he’s changed in the encounter. He *listens* to someone he would have been **expected** to ignore, and he chooses to act compassionately *despite* the expectations and demands of his culture and his disciples. By *choosing* to listen and to change his mind, when doing so would **cost him** honour in the sight of others, he demonstrates for us how a true person of faith discerns mission.

Part of our own life of faith is being willing to change and grow in our understanding. Change is *hard*, and sometimes changing course means having to admit we were *wrong* about something. But *sometimes* change just means that we’ve opened ourselves to a bigger part of the whole picture and we now understand more clearly. Because there is **no one** in this world who already has all the answers, and thus doesn't **need** to grow and change. In Matthew’s gospel, after this encounter, Jesus seems to have a deeper sense of call, a deeper sense of what it means for him to be faithful, and a deeper understanding that he is called to enter

into *relationship* - **real** relationship - with people *beyond* those he had originally thought. And real relationship, loving relationship, changes *everyone* involved.

Time and again God calls us to open our understanding and hearts to those *we* don't like, don't approve of, those who don't live up to **our** standards of how people 'ought' to behave. But like Jesus, we are called to open our hearts to those who fall outside our own understanding of who's worthy. To open our hearts to the lessons we can learn from the 'other', the outsider. We are called to **choose** to live out God's grace and love for *everyone*. Whether **we** think they 'deserve' it or not.