

Pentecost 14, Proper 15A  
August 17, 2008

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

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If ever there was a reading from Holy Scripture that needed a little probing, a little figuring out, it's this one just read this morning.

And I want to do that with you for a few minutes because I don't want you to go away thinking that Jesus was really rude to this poor distressed woman and that he all but called her a dog, and that she had to talk him into helping her, that she had to convince Jesus that even though she was a foreigner she still deserved to have her daughter cured of her illness. Jesus can get a very bad rap from this passage.

Now, I know you are ready to believe the best about Jesus, not the worst, otherwise you wouldn't be here to worship this morning. And it is not our business to defend Jesus from criticism either. The Son of God has his own ways of doing that. What we need to do is to see if there is something here for us to learn on this particular morning in August, in the year 2008, in Parma, Ohio.

Remember that the writer of the gospel of Matthew, and also of Mark, from which book this story comes, is trying to put across a point to those who are reading and hearing about the life of Jesus.

I think it may help to look at Jesus' conversation with the Canaanite woman as though it were one of Jesus' parables, in which everything in the story represents something else.

The food that Jesus speaks of feeding only to the children is his Word, his teachings, the revelation of God to his people. The children are the Jews, who have been God's chosen people since God revealed himself to Abraham and promised that he would be the father of many nations.

Jesus' mission as Messiah is to reveal God to this group, the people who have a history of God already even though they have not kept up their part of the covenant. At least they can be expected to know what their part of the covenant is.

And then there are the dogs. These are the outsiders, those who do not know the faith of the Hebrew people and so don't know the God of the Hebrew people. These are not expecting a Messiah, and they're not equipped to understand Jesus' words.

The analogy is an unfortunate one by today's standards. And it seems so out of character because we know Jesus does not look down on any people, no matter what their background. This is not an evaluation of the Canaanite woman as a person. It's about the ability of anyone outside the faith to understand.

In any case, God's plan did not call for revealing God to Gentiles until after the Jews knew him through Jesus. So the Gentiles are not seen as being receptive to this food Jesus offers. It's only for the children of Israel.

Not long after Jesus, Paul will carry the Word to the Gentiles all around the Mediterranean. But not yet.

From the way Jesus responds to this woman we learn a major lesson about the nature of God, and it's this: although God has a plan of revelation, he doesn't have to stick to it in every case. Here God is willing to break his own rules for the sake of one who shows faith.

As soon as Jesus sees this woman's faith through her words and her actions, he changes his mind.

She, a foreigner, kneels in the way Jews did in prayer, And she uses their words of prayer, too. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David," she says. She has found a way to learn these things that are not part of her culture.

Even when it looks as though Jesus is going to ignore her she persists in asking. And she's sure – you can tell from her insistence – she is sure Jesus can heal her daughter. Great is her faith. And Jesus says, "Let it be done for you as you wish."

It's true, my own early reaction to this story used to be to focus on the insult and try to figure out why Jesus would act that way toward her. But living with it over years, I now think the focus should be on the woman, this outsider who has the courage to ask for help. And just look at the value Jesus places on her courage to ask.

She shouts out to him. She makes a nuisance of herself to the disciples. She doesn't worry about being annoying, she apparently isn't afraid of Jesus' rejection. She just knows what her deep, passionate need is – the healing of her child. And she is sure Jesus can do it. That's it. It sounds so simple.

When we are sure, when we have faith that Jesus can heal us, then he will. Jesus places great value on our courage and faith when we ask for healing, enough to completely change his plans.

That's why I believe this story holds so much for us about how we should approach God in prayer. Our prayer is about our honest assessment of our deepest need, and it's about our persistence in asking for that need to be filled.

Now, I'm talking about what we need and not what we want. That's an important distinction to draw. It's very easy to fall into the trap of treating God as though he were a celestial vending machine.

You know, you put your prayer in the slot and make your selection. C3-and the answer you want from God, the solution you have chosen, is supposed to drop down where you can reach in and pull it out. Prayer does not work like that.

It isn't about what we want, it isn't about getting the answer that we ourselves have thought of, but rather it's about what we need, in God's eyes.

Too often we start kicking and shaking the machine, complaining that we haven't had an answer to our prayers. Trust, instead, that God will supply what we need. It may look a lot different from what we thought we wanted.

All Saints will now enter into a period of transition as you look ahead to calling a new rector to be your spiritual leader. I hope it will be a time of prayer for the whole parish, both individually and collectively. I hope all of you will pray without ceasing that All Saints will continue to grow and thrive and be a source of nourishment for all who come here to worship.

Matthew 15 lets us know that the Lord will respond to your prayers, even if, at times, it may seem as though he is not listening. Know that God has been known to change his plans for those who persist in asking.

See, as in this passage, that God welcomes all people to him (there are no outsiders) and he does so even if the timing of his plan is interrupted.

Learn that you can shout out your needs to God. Be loud and persistent in your prayers for All Saints. And God will be overjoyed at the passion with which you ask. Just trust that for God all things are possible. Be sure that he can cause you to endure, because he can.

Hear God respond to All Saints and say, "Great is your faith. Your parish is a place where the Spirit of God moves and I will sustain you as my hands, my heart, and my voice in this troubled world."

Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria