

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity
August 20, 2017, Year A
St. Dunstan's Anglican Church, Largo, FL

Genesis 45:1-15

Psalms 133

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15:10-28

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Theme: "Have faith that God is truly in charge of all things."

Today's gospel reading about the Canaanite woman is a complicated passage with puzzling statements that raise questions in need of answers. Why did Jesus say he was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel when he was in Gentile country talking to Gentiles? What kind of faith did Jesus see in this woman that would cause him to say she had great faith? And with whom do we identify in this story – with Jesus, with his disciples, or with the Canaanite woman?

Jesus had just finished a time of healing and teaching at Gennesaret on the Sea of Galilee. Some Pharisees and teachers of the law had come from Jerusalem to investigate him, and they had given him a hard time. So he withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon, for it was not yet time for him to fully confront them.

This woman came to Jesus looking for help, and persisted until she gained his attention. At first, Jesus' response sounds peculiar. Why did he say he was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel when he was in Gentile country talking to Gentiles? He was not there on a missionary journey. He just went there to get away from the persecution of the Scribes and Pharisees. But even while taking a step back to rest, he still stayed focused on his reason for coming among his creation. Jesus was simply telling this woman that he was sent as the Messiah or savior to the Jews first. They, the Jews, were to have the first opportunity to accept him as Messiah, and they were to pass on the blessing to all other peoples.

Back in Genesis chapter 12, God had told Abraham that through him, through Abraham, all the nations in the world would be blessed. And now, here's Jesus, a descendant of Abraham, who is himself the promised blessing. He came first to Israel, to the Jews, and then through them, he reached out to all the nations of the world.

Paul was an apostle or missionary to the Gentiles. He was a Jew sent forth to preach the gospel among the people of the Roman Empire. In the portion of his letter to the Church in Rome that we read today, he says that he magnifies his ministry among the Gentiles to make his fellow Jews jealous, hoping to win some to Christ. Through their interactions with each other, Paul knows and says that God will have mercy on both Jew and Gentile alike. Israel still plays a larger-than-life role in the future of the world today. The international politics surrounding Israel are intensely important.

Now the woman probably knew this from her religious tradition as well. The Jews had been in what is now Israel for a long time, and their Canaanite neighbors were well aware of the

unique claims of the Jews and their relationship with their God. She had probably already heard news of the miracles that Jesus had been performing, and now here he was standing in front of her. So she presses the point. The Word says, “She came and knelt down before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’”

Jesus gives a curious answer. “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” That sounds a bit cold coming from Jesus. What does it mean? By bread, he is referring to himself as the Bread of Life. The children are, of course, the house of Israel. And the Jews often referred to the pagan peoples around them as dogs, so this woman had probably heard this label used to refer to her and her people before.

But Jesus is not trying to degrade her. Rather he is giving her an opportunity to show her faith, and by example, to show those travelling with him what real faith looks like. Look at her response. She answers, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

What an incredible statement. Rather than being offended, she continues the dialogue with the wording that Jesus used. She knows she is in the presence of the Messiah of the Jews, she kneels, and humbly submits to him. She asks only that he grant her this one thing she has asked – that he heal her daughter who is severely possessed by a demon. She never doubts that he can do this; she only asks that he will.

Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire. And her daughter was healed instantly.” Just like in the creation account, God spoke, and it was. There is power in the Word of God. Jesus tells her that her faith is great. We should compare this with a similar statement Jesus made in last week’s gospel reading where Peter stepped out of the boat and walked to Jesus on the water until he began to sink. Jesus called Peter a man of little faith. What was the difference?

Before Peter got out of the boat, he recognized Jesus on the water and called out to him, “Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water.” Peter believes, but he is also testing. “If it is you,” conditional clause, then prove it by calling me to you. Peter believed at one level – he saw Jesus and recognized him – but he isn’t sure on another level – can this really be? Worldview problem again. Can people walk on water? Peter wants to believe so much that he jumps out of the boat – he really does have faith.

But look at the faith of the Canaanite woman. She never questions, she never doubts, she even submits to a less-than-pleasant comment about her ethnicity – she’s just there, pleading for her daughter to someone she is certain can help her, regardless of the personal cost. “This Jesus is the Messiah, and he can help me. I don’t need to know or see or hear anything else.”

So with whom do we identify in this story – with Jesus, the disciples, or the Canaanite woman? We might identify with the role Jesus is playing in this situation. Jesus is going about his business; we aren’t told exactly what that was, but it is clear that he had not sought out this woman nor had he expected to receive her. At first he hardly takes notice of her. But she persists in her pleas, and in the end he offers her assistance.

Do we take time to meet the needs of someone who calls on us for help? We don’t have to perform a miracle or teach a lesson like Jesus did to be of help to someone. But we can offer

ourselves, our resources and our services when we are asked. This is what has become known as Christian charity, loving another person, even a stranger, enough to get into their life and be of assistance where needed. This is what we are doing when we help people and ministries through our outreach, and it is the motivation for our mission ministry to the Vagabond trailer park.

Or we could identify with the disciples. Unfortunately, the disciples often provide us with examples of how not to behave, and this is one of those examples. I say unfortunately, because all too often we fall into the same trap. These guys try so hard – they’ve given up everything to follow Jesus, they listen to his teaching, they ask questions – but sometimes they just miss the boat.

In this story, they are only mentioned once. The Word says, “And his disciples came and begged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she is crying after us.’” Perhaps they were thinking “She’s a nuisance, and we are busy learning important things from what you are telling us. Can you just get rid of her?” It’s heartbreaking to look at their response from this point of view, but it is so easy to get caught up in our own holy agendas. Like the priest and the Levite in the Parable of the Good Samaritan who passed by on the other side of the road, are we so busy with our own agendas that we cannot take the time to serve God by serving others?

Or could we identify with the Canaanite woman? Now that we can see her as the heroine in the story, we might all want to, and perhaps it is a role to which we should aspire. Her faith was great because she did not question. She didn’t doubt that Jesus could help her. She didn’t let her worldview get in the way of knowing her Lord and responding to him. No “ifs,” no tests. “Lord, help me.” Actually, it is the same response Peter used after he had stepped out of the boat and walked to Jesus but then found himself in trouble and sinking into the waves. But unlike Peter, this woman never doubted, she just trusted in Jesus completely. She was single-minded with her focus on the only one who could help her.

In the end, this is really a teaching about worldviews. Does our worldview line up with God’s, or are we distracted by the wind around us to the point where we lose our focus. The wind is in the little things, not the big picture. It lies in the short cuts we take, the problems we leave unresolved, and the agendas of the Devil we dabble with, not realizing the distractions they create or the trouble they will cause. As hard as we might try to stay on track, it is easy to end up being distracted away from what is the best. We need to have the singleness of purpose of the Canaanite woman, and that comes from adopting a worldview that puts God and the things of God first.

“So let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

And now unto you, O Lord, be ascribed all might, majesty, power and dominion. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.