August 16, 2020

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

The story in Matthew’s Gospel of the interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman can be a little difficult to read. I struggle with it. The way Jesus acts seems a little “un-Jesussy” to me.

On first reading the thing that stood out for me most was Jesus’ reaction to the very first words of the Canaanite woman. To quote the scripture, “But he did not answer her at all”.  In other words, he completely ignored her.

But then it gets worse. The disciples tell Jesus that she is bothering them, “She keeps shouting at us”, they say. To this Jesus responds “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”.

Finally, in response to her most heartfelt plea, after she has knelt before him, he flat out insults her, saying “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”. Is Jesus suggesting that saving this woman’s child is comparable to taking food from the children of Israel and giving it to the dogs? Is this the Jesus that we have learned about in reading the Gospels, God incarnate, perfect human, without sin?

A little context might be helpful. This is quite a story for first century Palestine. Jesus’ ministry so far in Matthew’s gospel has been directed to those of Jewish origin in their own country. But now has travelled close to pagan territory, towards Tyre and Sidon. Here he encounters this woman who is described in the passage as a Canaanite.

         This is interesting. In first century Palestine there were no Canaanites; the term was anachronistic even at the time Matthew’s gospel was written. The Canaanites were the ancient enemies of the Jews, the people they conquered to take possession of the Holy land in the time of Moses and Joshua. It would have been clear to anyone hearing this Gospel that this woman was being described as an enemy, and an unclean one at that.

So the idea of this woman approaching Jesus is quite shocking to the sensibilities of those who were there and those who will be the first to read and hear the story.  Let me read you the way one commentator described it, inserting words as he tells the brief story.

         “Jesus takes his followers into foreign-unclean- territory, near the cities of Tyre and Sidon. And in this unclean place a most unconventional thing happens. A foreign (gasp!) woman (horrors!) comes alone (unthinkable!) and speaks (outrageous!) to the disciples and won’t obey (scandalous!) their instructions to stop following them (shocking!). This is quite a woman. Perhaps it is her brash behavior that causes Jesus to react the way he did (at least at first), in this decidedly un-Jesus like manner.

          But I still have those same nagging questions. I still see inconsistencies between the Jesus that is portrayed in this passage and the Jesus I have come to know through Scripture and in my life.

We don’t even have to go further than Matthew’s gospel to see some of these inconsistencies. It could be said that Jesus reaction towards this woman was because she was Pagan, but earlier in Matthew Jesus healed the child of a Centurion, a Roman soldier, clearly not a Jew.

In this passage Jesus speaks of scarcity in saying that he was sent only for the lost sheep of Israel and in his comment about feeding the dogs with what belongs to the children. But Jesus’ message about the Kingdom of God in Matthew has everything to do with abundance, God’s abundant love. This is what the miracles of the loaves and fishes tell us, and even the parable of the seeds, with the sower strewing seed all over the place, on all kinds of ground. These things speak of abundance, not scarcity.

There is of course the possibility that Jesus reacts the way he does because this is a woman. Matthew’s gospel is not what I would call rich in the tradition of acceptance of women. But still, to infer that she and her kind are mere dogs under the table takes this too far.

         So what is the problem with this passage? Why is Jesus depicted as so un-Jesus like, not conforming at all to my image of what I know Jesus to *really* be like.

         And there you have it of course.  I’m upset at this passage because in *my* reading of it *I* can’t figure out how Jesus conforms to *my* image of what Jesus should be like.

         I think we get into trouble when we try to domesticate Jesus, when we try to tame God and make God conform to what we think God should be, how God should act, what God should do. At the end of this passage Jesus is exactly who Jesus is, and the woman’s child is healed.

Perhaps this story does symbolize some kind of turnaround in the nature of Jesus’ ministry, but in the end I think perhaps this story has more to do with faith than anything else, specifically the faith of this woman. That’s what Jesus says. Upon hearing her final remark about even the dogs eating the crumbs, Jesus exclaims “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And, as the scripture says “her daughter was healed instantly.”

Is her faith great because she came up with such a pithy retort? I don’t really think so. She has already followed him around, begged for mercy, kneeled at his feet and recognized him as King David’s heir. I kind of doubt that it was those last few words which turned it around for her.

         In the end I believe that what was remarkable about her faith was that she insisted that Jesus be Jesus, that God be God. She never showed a doubt that her child would be healed, because she knew who Jesus was. Jewish tradition is rich in this way, insisting that God be God no matter what. The psalms of lament speak to this.

In the case of the Canaanite woman, she was able to say, “You can ignore me, your disciples can holler to send me away, you can even insult me and my lineage, but in the end I know you will hear my plea, because you are God and God always listens.”

And God does listen. God does not always heal what we want healed. God does not always act in conformity with what our expectations of God are. But God always listens, and God, through Christ, is with us and in us all the time.

We can have faith in this. We must have faith in this, and if we need an example of what it means to have faith, we need look no further than this Canaanite woman.