

Sermon: An Unexpected Encounter

8/16/2020

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“This just in,” the news anchor declares, “more controversy and outrage follow so-called Savior.” There are many passages in the Bible that we as Christians lift up as shining examples of whom Christ is and who he is calling us to be. Today’s Gospel lesson is not among them. As we just heard, today’s passage begins with Jesus taking leave of a crowd, likely somewhere near Jerusalem, and traveling towards Tyre and Sidon. Located in present-day Lebanon, the two coastal cities were on the outskirts of Israel and the home of many Jews and Gentiles. Well, one of these Gentiles, a descendent of Cain, or Canaanite, hears that Jesus will be passing nearby. Her daughter has been sick for some time and none of the local healers have been able to help. She is getting desperate, so desperate that upon finding Jesus she shouts, “Have mercy me, Lord, Son of David.” All that she hears in response is silence.

Silence, not exactly the response that we expect from the man who, just a few weeks ago, was moved by compassion to miraculously feed over five thousand people and heal those among them who were sick. We expect for Jesus to drop everything, follow the woman, and heal her daughter. But neither he nor his disciples saw the need. After the disciples ask Jesus to send her away, he says to her, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” “You are a Canaanite,” we can hear between the lines, “if you were one of God’s chosen people I would go with you and heal your daughter, but you are not. You and your daughter are neither my or God’s concern.”

The rebuke was stinging, but the woman in today’s Gospel lesson would not be deterred. She immediately goes over, kneels before Jesus, and begs him, “Lord, help me.” And

once more Jesus shows her little to no compassion. “It is not fair,” he bluntly states, “to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” “You are a dog,” he seeming says while looking down on her. “You are no better than those four-legged scavengers who rummage around in the trash, eat dead things, and spread disease. No, I will not heal your daughter.”

Over the years there have been many attempts to soften Jesus’ words. Perhaps, some say, he was just tired and having a bad day, like we all do. All we need to do is dig deeper, behind the words, to discover what Jesus really meant. Others suggest that we focus on the Greek word for dog. Surely Jesus was not calling her a four-legged scavenger, but a little dog, a puppy. He was noting her obedience and energetic spirit, her determination to have her daughter healed. Biblical scholar William Barclay, who wrote a popular set of Bible commentaries, suggests that Jesus said these harsh words with a smile on his face and compassion in his eye. Perhaps he even winked at her as he said them to make sure that she was in on the joke. Except that in this passage I don’t see or hear a joke or a smile, and being tired and frustrated does not make what he said any better.

No, when I hear the woman say to Jesus, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table,” what I hear in her voice is desperation and despair. I hear someone who loves her daughter so much that she is willing to call herself a dog, as being less than human, if it means that her daughter will be healed. I hear someone who approaches Jesus, in the words of biblical scholar Sharon Ringe, when he had “his compassion down” and helps him realize something very important about God—that God’s love, mercy, generosity, and healing are not just meant for the Jews, but for everyone. Her faith revealed this to Jesus, and on account of her faith, her daughter was healed.

As Christians, we struggle with passages like today's Gospel lesson because they force us to acknowledge Jesus' humanity. They force us to question what it means if Jesus did always understand the full scope of his ministry. We feel comfortable describing him as being perfect, compassionate, a good listener, welcoming, and unprejudiced. Then we read passages like today's and can't help but acknowledge that he was not just divine, but human as well. Like us, he did not know everything—otherwise, why would he have prayed to the Father for guidance?—and because he did not know everything he sometimes made mistakes. Honest mistakes, but mistakes nonetheless. It appears, at the very least, that he honestly believed that God had only sent him to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel,” one of which the Canaanite woman was not. So he told her that she and her daughter were not his concern, until her desperation, persistence, and faith convinced him to change his mind.

That day, I can't help but wonder if the woman's daughter was not the only one who was healed. Following their encounter, we see a change in Jesus' ministry. Before, when he sent out the disciples, he specifically told them not to go to the Gentiles and to Samaria. Afterwards, at the end of Matthew's Gospel, in the Great Commission, he calls on them to go out and make disciples of all nations. Jesus comes to realize that he and his followers have not just been sent to redeem God's chosen people, but all of God's children, both Jew and Gentile. A realization for which we should forever be thankful, because the fact of the matter is that we are not the disciples in today's Gospel lesson, nor are we even the lost sheep. We are the woman, a Gentile, anxiously awaiting his arrival. Like the woman, we recognize our need for Jesus, yet know that we do not deserve his healing. No, we cannot and never will earn God's grace. We do not deserve to eat the crumbs from under the table, let alone the feast above. That is why we are so blessed, blessed that when it comes to God's table, there is and always will be more than enough.

A few weeks ago, while preaching on the feeding of the five thousand, I spoke of how God can take what little we have and make it into more than enough. Today's passage puts a twist on that message. Today, we are reminded that Jesus not only gave the entire crowd their fill, there were twelve baskets left over. Twelve baskets...that day Jesus made so much food that there were more crumbs left over than what they started out with. God loves each and every one of us so much that there will always be more than enough food to go around. The question is: are we willing to do what it takes to get our fill? Are we willing to shout, to kneel, and to maybe even question God? May we all have the faith to go where God is leading us, do what God is calling us to do, and be who God is calling us to be. Amen.