

Pentecost 14
August 17, 2008
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The Gospel story this morning opens with Jesus engaged in a dispute with the Pharisees over purity issues. Temple regulations require washing your hands before eating. If you eat with hands unwashed then you are defiling your body. It had been noted that Jesus and his disciples often would eat without washing their hands. The Pharisees and scribes come to Jesus to ask why he and his followers do not keep the tradition of the elders. "Why do you not wash your hands before you eat?" Jesus, as often happens, turns the tables. He says to the crowd, "It is not what goes in the body that defiles the body but what comes out of the body." Jesus explains, evil intentions are what defile the body eating with unwashed hands cannot defile the body.

The Pharisees, who are devoted religious people, do not seem to understand that outward works, in this case the careful observance of the Law, does not make them an insider with God. When Peter asks him to explain what he is saying it is evident Jesus' own disciples do not seem to understand what he is saying any more than the Pharisees.

By this time in his ministry, Jesus has to be frustrated. Everywhere he turns it seems he is misunderstood. He understands himself to be Israel's Messiah, the One sent by God to bring salvation to Israel. However, none of the people around him, who should understand, seem to get what he is saying or why he is doing what he is doing. Faithful religious folks, like the Pharisees and scribes, reject his message altogether. Others accept him, but for who they want him to be. He is a wonderful teacher, a healer, a meal ticket, but the Son of David, the Messiah, not so sure about that.

Jesus had to have been frustrated by the lack of understanding but he is portrayed as compassionate, patient, polite and forgiving. Jesus comes across in Scripture as Mr. Nice Guy.

Well, until you read the gospel for today. I suppose Jesus had reached his boiling point. He has traveled with his disciples to Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman calls out to Jesus. All of Jesus frustration seems to be taken out on this poor woman. Jesus in this account draws a line in the sand. It is clear there are those who are insiders and those outside, this poor woman is outside.

Matthew tells us that a Canaanite woman came out and started shouting at Jesus, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon." The first thing to notice is that the woman is identified as a "Canaanite", the only time in Scripture this term is used to describe an individual. Matthew calls her a "Canaanite" to remind the reader of the centuries old bitter controversy between the Israelites and the Canaanites. This ethnic slur emphasizes the tension between God's chosen people and those outside the faith. This woman is an outsider. Jesus totally ignores the woman. He does not even acknowledge that she called to him.

The woman does not get the message, she keeps calling out to Jesus. So the disciples come to Jesus and ask him to send the woman away. They probably thought that if he just spoke to her maybe did a little miracle she would go away. Jesus responds, "She is not a sheep of my flock. Why should I be concerned about her? I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

The woman comes and kneels at Jesus' feet. She prays a short but powerful prayer, "Lord, help me."

Don't you expect at this point Jesus is going to help her? Jesus' answer to her seems rude, "It is not fair to take children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jesus continues to treat this woman like an outsider. "You are not my problem. I can't take food intended for the children of Israel and throw it to a dog like you." Wow, see what I mean, Jesus is not nice in this story. This poor woman received the blunt of his frustration.

The shocking thing to me is that this woman seems to deserve Jesus' help. Outsider though she is, she seems to know what the insiders do not get. First, she knows she needs Jesus. Her daughter is possessed by a demon. There is nothing she can do to solve this problem except pray for a miracle - the kind of miracle Jesus can bring. She knows something the disciples have missed even after the feeding of thousands and the stilling of a storm. She knows something it seems, we who consider ourselves insiders today, seem to have missed. We need Jesus to have mercy on us. Oh, we know it with our heads but I am talking about our heart.

The other thing she knows is that Jesus is the Messiah. She calls him "Son of David" a title reserved for the long promised Messiah of Israel. At last Jesus has met someone who knows her need for him and who knows who Jesus is.

Seems like Jesus would smile on her and say, "Finally someone who understands." But he doesn't. Maybe it is the fact that Jesus is preoccupied with the knowledge that he is the Messiah sent to save the lost sheep of Israel. That is the prophecy that defines who the Messiah is supposed to do and Jesus is trying to do it well.

This woman seems to know something Jesus does not know. The Messiah is sent not just to the house of Israel but to all of God's people. Perhaps this Canaanite woman taught Jesus a lesson about God's love. She redefined for him the notion of insiders and outsiders.

The woman responds to Jesus, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table." Jesus cannot ignore the faith of this woman. She grabbed hold of the Savior by the collar and would not let him go. She refused to allow herself to be labeled an outsider undeserving of God's love and grace.

"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done as you wish." Jesus praised the woman not for the depth of her need or for recognizing him as the Messiah; Jesus praises her for her faith. This Canaanite woman gave Jesus a wonderful gift. She suggested to him that he was defining his mission much too narrowly. As a result of her challenge, Jesus received a whole new vision and focus. A vision and focus that he passed on to us the church.

Heidi Husted wrote in an article in *The Christian Century*, "The day the gospel went to the dogs was the day it came to us. We are some of the "dogs" who have received the good news. When Jesus opened himself up to the mission of the whole world, he opened his church up to the world. Now we are to open ourselves to the whole world in mission."

For you see there are no insiders or outsiders, there are only human beings in desperate need of God's love and grace. Or, if you prefer, dogs in need of crumbs that fall from the Master's table.