

August 20, 2017 • Baptism

“Faith Anyway”

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

The story we hear from Matthew’s fifteenth chapter offers transformational good news to all who would be disciples of Jesus Christ. But it is a shocking story, a story that should come with a warning that its contents will reach deep into your mind and your heart and your soul. It will engage you and disturb you, and change you, if you let it. This is gospel, Good News, but it doesn’t come easy.

Maybe that makes it totally appropriate for a day on which we consider what baptism means and what it means to be a follower of the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. For in the baptism we share with Jesus, we are called by God, claimed by God, inspirited by God to grow into the image of that very One who created and creates us, who gives us new life and makes us whole.

It’s a story for this moment in the life of our nation, as well. A painful and divided time, when healing is so needed. The story we hear this morning reminds us that we ALL, including Jesus himself, need to assess whatever ways we may not be living into the fullness of life God intends. If we’re wearing blinders we don’t even know we have on, if the things we’ve been taught and told are serving only to reinforce old prejudices, old ways of thinking and being---we all need to be challenged in order to grow into the fullness of our baptismal calling.

The Gospel today reveals to us very good news about our ability to change, the power within us to confront, as Jesus did, our own prejudices, preconceptions and grow beyond them. Grow we can, and grow we must. You know, there’s a quote that’s been going around this past week, attributed to the great Nelson Mandela of South Africa: “No one is born hating another person because of the color of [their] skin, or [their] background, or [their] religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love...”

Even Jesus himself, as shocking as that might seem to us, Jesus, being both fully human and fully divine, even Jesus needed to be taught to truly love. Throughout the Gospels, we see many ways in which Jesus was very “human,” just as we are. He made friends. He had deep love for his disciples. He got angry. He cried. He mourned. He seemed to doubt God in the moments of his suffering. He was fully human, even as he was full divine.

In the story we hear this morning, we see that even Jesus had to learn to love and grow into the fullness of his own baptism. Jesus is changed by the faith he professes and the God he loves. This is the gift and promise of baptism.

Let’s go back and look at it again.

Jesus had crossed the border into the region of Tyre and Sidon, a gentile region, home of long-time enemies of the Jewish people. This is rather like saying: he went across the tracks, or South of the Border, where the Canaanites lived. They hated and feared each other. Here, Jesus is truly tested, in the person of a feisty Canaanite woman who pleads with him to heal her daughter.

For Jesus, this Canaanite woman embodied many of the prejudices he would have carried within himself, inherited from the society and culture in which he had been raised. She was from a group that the Hebrews looked down on, hated even, regarded as enemies. She was a foreigner, with a different language and faith. She was a woman, and she was a woman speaking for herself, not through the intermediary of a father or husband. She pleads for her little daughter, in a culture in which daughters were seen as an expendable commodity, a drain on family resources. For all these reasons, Jesus would have had inculcated in him deep layers of narrow-minded prejudice and discriminatory bigotry.

The person who embodies all of that meets him face to face shouting: “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me. My daughter is tormented by a demon!” She is shouting, yes, but her words are respectful. Though not a Jew,

she calls him “Lord, Son of David,” and pleads for mercy, much as Peter had done, when sinking beneath the waves. “Have mercy on me, Lord. My daughter is tormented by a demon!”

Now, really. What mother would not want her daughter to be healed? What parent would not do anything to find that healing, that health care her daughter needed?

She pleads—here the text is all too clear about what happens next—and this is the really shocking part, painful for us to hear—she pleads--“but he, Jesus, did not answer her at all.” His disciples, annoyed by her shouting, encourage him to just quickly give her what she wants, so that she can be dismissed and sent away. Now it gets worse. Jesus says, in effect, I don’t have to deal with this woman. The Jews are my people, whom I’ve been sent to save. He is cold, mean, almost cruel.

She persists. She won’t give up. She comes and kneels right in front of him and says again: “Lord, help me.” And he says, harshly, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Could Jesus who had fed the five thousand men, and all the women and the children with plenty left over, possibly be saying this to one desperate woman pleading at his feet?

She still won’t let go. She takes a risk, crosses the borderline to persuade him in spite of himself. “Yes, Lord” still calling him Lord. “But even little dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table. The crumbs. The littlest of things. Jesus, she’s reminding him: the crumbs of faith will be enough.

Something happens within Jesus’ heart. Grace happens. Love happens. Conversion happens--a sea-change within Jesus himself. Jesus is transformed. And because of the Spirit of God at work within Jesus, he can finally answer the woman, saying: “Great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish.” From that moment, her daughter is restored to health.

And from that moment Jesus himself is also healed--from bigotry and misplaced ethnic pride, from ancient angers and fears. By his very life, Jesus shows us where healing lies—in the heart, through the grace of God, in the waters of our baptism. From the wellspring of life comes new life

And thus, could the apostle Paul say: “Christ is our peace, for in his flesh he has made Jew and Gentile one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. He shows us how. He shows us why. He shows us the way of true love.

May God bless us all with healing and new life this day. May God bless our land with healing and with peace. And may God bless baby Sophia, her parents and family, and her church family as with her we seek to walk in the Way that leads to life.

Amen

Notes:
Nelson Mandela
Long Walk to Freedom

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