



The Miracle of Change

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
Sunday, August 17, 2008*

Matthew 15:10-28:

Then Jesus called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile." 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.

One of the problems with knowing the end of a story is that it colors our view of the action and the characters—we can never really read a story again for the first time. And so it is with the Gospels. Once we know Jesus' story, we've read the dramatic account of Jesus' baptism, we've been to the foot of the cross and seen the empty tomb, it is hard to see Jesus as anything but a kind of "Superman." And so far in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has done some pretty impressive things. He has taught with authority, cast out demons, healed hundreds if not thousands, walked on water and fed multitudes with a few loaves and fish. And if that weren't a good enough display of Divine power and love, he has also shown himself to be supremely socially conscious, unafraid to take on the authorities of the day, to break societal and religious norms in the name of God's love and justice. So we can feel pretty comfortable and satisfied that we are on the right team and what we have in Jesus is a God-man we can all get behind.

So, when we come to this encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman, we just know what will happen. Despite the fact that Jesus was looking for a little down time, time away from the crowds to rest from his grueling healing and teaching schedule, we just know that when he is confronted with this woman's plea for her demon-possessed child, he will respond. The fact that she is a Gentile will make no difference to the one who just forcefully taught that what the disciples thought was clean and unclean was irrelevant in the Kingdom of God, that how one acts—what one does is what is important. He will hear and answer her request made in love and will heal and restore to wholeness this innocent little girl. So we listen as the woman begs Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. And then—the entirely unexpected response, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel . . . it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Did Jesus just refuse this woman's request? And worse, did he just call her a dog? A dog. Not cute beloved little Fluffy with a designer collar and monogrammed pillow for a bed, but a filthy low outcast scavenging animal. Surely this can't be right. And then, the woman, in a fabulous display ofchutzpah, or maybe just plain old desperation, replies to Jesus, 'Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.' We wait for Jesus response. The silence hangs in the air—I imagine a look on Jesus' face that goes from sadness and puzzlement to a glimmer of amusement and understanding. And he says, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And the story reports that the woman's daughter was healed instantly. Another happy ending, another miracle.

Part of me is always surprised that this story made it into the Sunday morning line-up. It doesn't exactly show Jesus in the best possible light—coming right on the heels of a conversation between Jesus and his disciples regarding religious rules, what is “in” and “out”; it seems bizarre that Jesus almost doesn't seem to have heard his own teaching. Like some of the other disturbing and puzzling stories and sayings of Jesus, you know the ones like “pluck out your right eye and cut off your right hand,” “let the dead bury their own dead,” “sell everything you have and follow me,” its hard to see these as great evangelical tools. The immediate response we have isn't “sign me up,” but “what the heck?” I think the issue that makes us squirm in *this* story is the sheer stark humanity of Jesus—this vision of Jesus rudely dismissing the Gentile woman is jarring—Jesus isn't looking too much like God at this particular Gospel moment.

We tend to be far more comfortable with a Jesus who acts like we think he should, who acts like God, or at least like we think God should act. We want Jesus to be better than us, to stride through life confidently and purposefully, knowing all that is to happen before it does, always being kind, generous and loving, moving gracefully towards his death and then triumphantly conquering it. The last thing we want, despite our credal insistence on Jesus being both fully divine and fully human, is a human being. Yet here, in this story, that is precisely what we encounter. We see Jesus when he is tired, stressed out and irritable—in other words, when he is fully human. And, if we're honest, we're probably a little disappointed in him.

And yet, there is comfort in this display of humanity, because, if we allow ourselves to, we can see a miracle. Not a flashy healing or food multiplying miracle, although the little girl is healed of her demon possession, but a miracle nonetheless. Not the miracle Jesus does, but the one he experiences. Jesus appears to realize, in his interaction with this woman, that his idea of what it is that God seems to want him to do at that moment may be too narrow. That maybe the Gentiles aren't out of bounds. He appears to see this woman whom he has named a dog in a new light—he sees something in her at the end of the story that he may have missed in the beginning—her humanity, her human dignity.

“You dog.” Those words that Jesus appears to use to express his view that the woman is an outsider, is not among those for whom God's mercy applies, echo around my head. We hear ourselves called dogs by others and we believe it. We call others dogs and we believe it. We see people in terms of categories—those that are “in” and those that are outsiders dogs. We think that certain beliefs and practices are acceptable and others are not. We accept what our societal, religious and cultural norms tell us are good and bad, in and out, about both others and ourselves. We think that our own theology is right, or at least more right, than that of others. We let ourselves be trapped by our humanity, our attitudes. And here is the miracle. When we are tempted to allow our humanity to hem us in, to trap us into believing some in and some out—or even something as mundane as just plain having a bad day, we are looking for a little time apart and we find ourselves rudely interrupted; we don't have to allow our grumpiness to define us, to have the final word. Just as Jesus learned to reassess his view of the Canaanite woman, to see in her the image of God, we can learn to reassess our view of others and ourselves. We can learn that even those sometimes deemed dogs are included in God's kingdom, are beloved of God. We can learn that our theology can trap us into attitudes and practices that are not reflective of God's love and mercy freely offered to all. And we can learn this not by some imposition of the divine will onto our humanity, but we can learn it *through* our humanity.

You see, the real miracle in this story is a good old-fashioned miracle of human growth and development, of change, of learning a new way of seeing and being in the world. Jesus raw humanity in this story—his growth and development give us hope. We can, like Jesus, change; we can learn to see others in a new way, to see the inherent dignity, the God image in every human being. When others cry out to us that they are not dogs, or that even if dogs, they are still entitled to the crumbs, we can hear them and be changed by their pleas. Like the many in the mass healing story immediately after the story of the Canaanite woman whose eyes and ears were opened by Jesus, perhaps a narrative restatement of the opening of Jesus' eyes and ears to the pleading of the woman, so our ears and eyes can become truly opened to the world around us. This is not to say that we will never feel stressed out, that we will never fall into seeing others as less than, as not fully acceptable, or of seeing ourselves as less than, not fully acceptable. We know that part of being human is to struggle, is to have bad days. But we also know, that like Jesus, we don't have to allow our bad moments, the little stuff that nit-picks away at our souls, our moments of wanting to disengage from others and from the world to define who and how we are in the world.

We can choose to allow ourselves to grow and to see the human dignity in each and every person. Even if at first we dismiss people, we can take a second look in which we see them as children of God, different perhaps than us, maybe even carrying a different idea of God, but children of God nonetheless. Like the persistent woman in this story taught Jesus, we can learn that God's will and God's ways are much more extravagant and wildly inclusive than we could ever imagine.

Jesus was fully human. Jesus had moments when he was irritable and stressed out. Jesus learned and grew. Jesus allowed grace to redefine who he was, and so can we. And that is good news indeed.



Open hearts. Open minds.