

Message for August 16, 2020

Matthew 15:21-28

I must admit that for me at least, today's scripture passage relates one of the most troubling episodes in Jesus' entire ministry; indeed it is an episode that at first seems to challenge our very notion of what Jesus was truly like.

Jesus had decided that he needed to take a break and so he left the Jewish heartland and traveled to the area of Tyre and Sidon. This is the first thing that we ought to note in this episode too, that Jesus was now the foreigner in a foreign land. While there he was approached by one of the locals, a Canaanite woman whose daughter was very ill. Somehow she had heard about Jesus and she wanted him to make her little girl well. She asked Jesus for help but Jesus' response was to ignore her. The woman however persisted and finally the disciples urged Jesus to just send her away. Jesus seemed to agree with their request: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" he said. In other words, his ministry was to his own people and only his own people.

Despite Jesus' seemingly uncaring attitude, the woman did not give up. She knelt before Jesus and begged him: "Lord help me!" And what was Jesus' response to this heartfelt plea? "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

To say this to that desperate woman was beyond harsh, it was downright cruel. Back then it was an incredible insult to call a person a dog. I am sure that most people would have just given up at this point and walked away, in tears perhaps or even in anger. Not this woman though. Perhaps she and her daughter were nothing more than 'dogs' in the eyes of Jesus but even so, as she quite reasonably pointed out, even the dogs got to eat the crumbs that fell from the master's table. After hearing this Jesus seemed to change his attitude altogether.

"Woman", he said, "you have great faith! Your request is granted!" and with that the little girl was healed. And we should note too that this is

the one and only time in his entire ministry that Jesus ever referred to a person as having a 'great' faith.

The episode ends on this happy note but even so, what was going on with Jesus beforehand? Here he was, a guest in a foreign land, insulting one of the locals. We have Jesus seemingly totally indifferent to a mother's cry for help. This certainly doesn't seem to be the Jesus that we all know, respect and love! This doesn't seem to be the Jesus who when asked what religion and by implication what life itself is all about, replied with the words of the Great Commandment saying that we should love God and our neighbours as ourselves, our neighbour being anyone who needs our help. So why then was Jesus initially seemingly so harsh?

The most common explanation is that Jesus knew all along that he was going to heal the little girl and so his apparent indifference was all just a charade; what he was doing was trying to teach his disciples a lesson.

What we have to realize is that Judaism at the time of Jesus had a very keen sense of identity; a strong sense of who were insiders and who were outsiders. In fact in a prayer recited every morning a devout Jew thanked God for not creating him as a Gentile. Judaism tended to be exclusive rather than inclusive and at first Jesus appeared to share the disciples' presumed bias and prejudices. Then however he made it clear that he really didn't. That is why in the end he performed the miracle and praised the woman saying that she, an outsider, had the greatest faith of all. The clear implication was that faith may be found in the most unexpected places and people. In other words Christianity was to be inclusive rather than exclusive. We don't know if the disciples really learned this lesson that day but it is a lesson that the church continually seems to be relearning.

In the earliest days of the church for example all of its members were Jewish and so they quite naturally kept such as the dietary laws that they had grown up with. This was fine at first but then when some Gentiles, the non-Jews, started to convert to Christianity? The result was a bitter debate. On one side were those who insisted that in order to be a 'real'

Christian, a person had to become Jewish first. In other words the attitude was that in order to be a true Christian you must dress like us, eat like us and be like us and if you don't, then you don't really belong. The issue raged between those who were exclusive and those who were more inclusive and it even threatened to rip the church apart; all we have to do is read the Book of Acts or some of Paul's letters. In the end of course, those who were more inclusive won the debate and that is why most Christians today do not have such as kosher kitchens. But did the church learn its lesson? Not really, all we have to do is think of some of our own spiritual ancestors.

During my summer holidays I read Colin Calloway's fascinating and informative book: "White People, Indians and Highlanders". Amongst other things, the author explores the infamous Highland Clearances when so many Scots were, against their will, forced off the land that their families had lived on for generations. The author then explores the parallel between this and what happened to the native peoples of North America; how they too were forced off the lands that they and their ancestors had lived on since the dawn of time. In both cases the original inhabitants, the Highland Scots and the native peoples of both Canada and the United States, were regarded as being little more than barbaric savages who needed to be civilized. Part of this civilizing of course meant being Christianized.

As a part of this 'civilizing' process it was decided more than two hundred years ago that the people of the Scottish Highlands, though already Christian, need to be 'Christianized'. The Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge was set up for this purpose. Missionaries were sent and schools were built. This sounds laudable so what was the problem? It was said that in order to be a 'real' Christian, a person had to speak English. The native language, Gaelic, was said to be barbaric and even un-Christ like. Children caught speaking it were punished and even beaten. But how can a language be un-Christ like? A language can be many things but un-Christ like is not one of them. The message however was simple enough; if you want to be a 'real' Christian then you will speak like us, worship like us, and ultimately be like us.

Speaking English and even being English was made synonymous with being a Christian. Culture and Christianity were quite wrongly identified as being one and the same thing. The result was a tragedy but of course we have our own dreadful example of this here in Canada; the residential schools.

The residential school system had many goals, one of which being to make the native children Christians but it failed miserably. It failed in no small part because it was firmly believed that in order to be a true Christian a person could not keep their own native language and culture. The children for example were punished and even beaten if they did not speak English or French. The children's own culture and spiritual traditions were dismissed as being worthless. Once again, as in the Scottish Highlands, the message was clear; in order to be a 'real' Christian, you must dress, speak, worship and even be just like us. The result was a heartbreaking tragedy for the children and their families; a tragedy which still haunts the victims, aboriginal-church relations and our larger society to this day.

Despite what many people have thought down through the ages or may even still think today, Christianity and a society's values and culture are not one and the same thing; while societies and cultures change, the truth of the Gospel is timeless. Indeed as a person once said, God must love variety. If he didn't then why did he create the universe with all of its glorious diversity: the seasons, the fish, the animals, the birds, and even us human beings? We humans are all so different and yet, we are all still created in the image of God. We may sometimes choose to be exclusive but God isn't; indeed I suspect that God is far far more inclusive than what we oftentimes ever dream of.