

Proper 15  
Year A 2017  
Aug 20, 2017

Matthew 15:21-28

Come Holy Spirit, give life to my words.

In the name of God, creator, redeemer and giver of life.

Amen.

Today's gospel is unsettling.

Let's face it, it's also confusing.

Do we just give up and  
chalk it up to just another  
unintelligible scriptural missive  
or do we sit with it for awhile  
and try to tease out  
the message to us,  
here and now?

What significance does  
this story provide to us today,  
in this time and place?

Surely there's more to this  
gospel than a simple  
admonition not to feed  
your dog under the table -- right?

Let's take a little time with this  
and hope that proves to be  
the case or my dog is going  
to be sorely disappointed in future.

Jesus has made his way into the region  
of Tyre and Sidon.

He has left Jewish territory and  
is trekking through Gentile territory.

Territory where the unclean,  
the outsiders reside.

He is immediately met by a one  
woman welcoming committee,  
and not a docile, biddable  
committee at that.

He is immediately set upon  
by a Canaanite woman  
shouting for Jesus' attention.

Shouting so much so that  
the disciples implore Jesus  
to send her away.

Her shouts are cries for mercy.

For Jesus' mercy because  
the Canaanite woman's daughter  
is tormented by a demon.

But Jesus just keeps walking,  
totally ignoring her cries for  
compassion and kindness.

The woman has even recognized  
and named Jesus in front of the  
Canaanite crowd and the disciples  
as Lord, Son of David.

At this point in Matthew's gospel,  
the disciples have just now begun  
to recognize Jesus after Peter's  
encounter with Jesus as they  
walked on the sea.

And this woman, a Canaanite,  
a Gentile, an unclean, outsider,  
has recognized Jesus from  
the minute she laid eyes on him.

And still the disciples urge Jesus  
to quiet her cries, to ignore her  
pleas for mercy and compassion,  
and to send her away empty handed.

And Jesus, what is Jesus' first  
reaction to this woman  
who has publicly named him for  
who he is?

He simply keeps walking.

"He did not answer her at all"  
we are told.

How can this be?

Isn't this the same Jesus  
that has been travelling  
all around performing miracles  
left and right?

The same Jesus that has  
sat face to face with the unclean,  
broken bread with them,  
entered their homes,  
touched the leper?

He refuses the pleas of  
the disciples to send her  
away but he does not initially  
respond.

And she keeps crying out  
for mercy.

But then, finally, Jesus responds.

In my mind, I picture  
this as Jesus tossing back his  
response in an irritated tone  
over his shoulder as he continues  
to walk away,

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

But if this is true,  
why cross the sea to Gentile territory?

Why land the boat,  
climb out and begin  
travelling through the region  
with disciples in tow?

And then, this is my  
favorite part.....

The Canaanite woman,  
the suffering Gentile mother of  
a daughter afflicted by a dreadful illness  
calls Jesus out.

She comes to Jesus,  
drops to her knees,  
and calls Jesus out.

She calls him out in front  
of her neighbors,  
the crowd, and  
his disciples.

She bids him,  
"Lord, help me."

Lord, she publicly names him.

Lord of all.

She beseeches him,  
"Help me."

In essence,  
help me,  
help my daughter.

I picture Jesus  
standing looking down into  
the face of this woman,  
a mother with a suffering daughter,  
and being completely taken aback.

And Jesus,  
what does he do?

Initially it seems that He admonishes her.

"It is not fair to take the children's food  
and throw it to the dogs."

And she comes right back with,

"Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat  
crumbs that fall from their masters table."

Resistance, persistence, vigilance  
as commentator Karoline Lewis states.

This woman will not be dismissed,  
her cries rejected,  
nor will she quietly slink away.

She reminds Jesus  
why he sailed across the sea.

Why he went off by himself  
to pray, to abide in God,  
before he landed in Gentile territory.

She names him publicly as Lord of all.

She entreats His power over  
that which torments her daughter,  
and she brings Him face to face  
with the "other" he has come  
to free from oppression.

She is the personification of the  
widow and the orphan He has come to lift up.

She is the voiceless, powerless, outcast  
to whom He brings hope and to conquer despair.

She looks him straight in the eye  
and persists in her appeals  
for the Lord of all to answer her prayers.

She bears witness to her faith that He  
will not reject her pleas,  
that he will grant her mercy,  
that he will affirm that the mercy  
and love of God is available to all.

Just as he did for the  
Roman centurion in healing his slave  
and as he did for the leper in  
making him clean,  
Jesus establishes with his  
act of mercy to the Canaanite woman  
and her daughter,  
that the love and mercy of God  
is meant for everyone.

Everyone.

So what does this mean  
for those of us gathered  
here today in this place  
as the community of St. Andrew's?

What does it mean for each  
of us as we go about our daily lives  
in our families,  
in our neighborhoods,  
in our workplaces?

Both Jesus and the Canaanite woman have shown us the essential message of Christianity.

God's love, compassion and mercy are for everyone.

No one is beyond the love of God.

God is not the God of despair, defeat and resignation to the present conditions of violence, hatred and injustice.

Jesus and the Canaanite woman show us that this is not the nature of Jesus, the nature of God, and not the essence of the Kingdom Jesus reveals to us.

Instead, Jesus and the Canaanite woman confirm that no matter their ethnicity, gender, nationality, economic status, IQ, political identification or religion, everyone is a child of God, made in the image of God, and deserving of God's love and mercy.

These are desperate and divisive times, my friends.

There are those in this country who are all too happy to set as rivals any number of communities or demographics of people against each other, fanning the flames of suspicion, hatred, and violence.

We have set before us today the example of who and how we are to be in these times.

We are people who believe: in the fundamental goodness of all humanity, made in the image of God, and loved by God.

This means my brothers and sisters in Christ, that, indeed, God even loves and extends mercy to those who seek to foment violence and hatred.

That's a hard reality to wrap our heads around isn't it?

But, if we truly believe what we say we believe, that all of humanity is created in the image of God, and if we vow to respect the dignity of every human being, what do we do?

How do we show forth our beliefs, not just in robotically reciting a set of creedal affirmations or vows, but how do we live out what we believe in our deepest core?

Resistance, persistence, vigilance.

We must not shrink away from  
or simply dismiss those who  
are set on created chaos and violence  
in the name of their beliefs.

We must resist hatred with love.

We must persist in not just  
reciting our beliefs but  
in living into our beliefs.

And we must be vigilant  
in the face of all that stands  
in opposition to love, mercy,  
and justice.

This is our call.

This is our vow.

This is the essence of being a follower  
of Christ in these times.

It is our task to reclaim Christianity.

Let us not give in to despair.

But let us instead,  
recognize that it is our privilege to proclaim the  
love, mercy and justice of God  
in these times.

Let us go forth into the world  
proclaiming the love of God to all.