

14th Week after Pentecost, Proper 15 – Year A – August 17, 2008
Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15: [10-20] 21-28
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Along with being seriously encouraged to “Keep Austin Weird”, the tourist advertising tells us that Austin, Texas is the music capital of the world. Well, here’s an update, because having lived in Austin, I have to say that the advertising may be a little misleading. Yes, there is plenty of good music, and it is often free, but the secret of Austin is not its music. The secret lives of Austin residents are actually revealed through their car bumper stickers. It was a rare day when I didn’t see several new additions to the amazing array of proclamations, exhortations, and just plain ludicrous or incomprehensible statements. In fact, having lived in a variety of locales, I will always remember Austin affectionately as the bumper sticker capital of the world. There are several good ones that come to mind including, “If you’re not completely appalled, you’re not paying attention.” Yet, one of the best bumper stickers around is the one that reads, “I wish I was the person my dog thinks I am.” And now that I have a dog, I know exactly where that bumper sticker is coming from. That kind of unconditional love and acceptance is truly hard to match in relationships with people – but absolutely the norm for our relationship with God.

No matter how many times I read the account from today’s Gospel reading, I always get hung up on the dog thing. My hackles rise and I want to howl in protest! It sounds, and it really is, offensive on so many levels, even more so when it is recorded as coming right from the mouth of Jesus. With modern eyes, ears, and sensibilities, it is truly hard to put ourselves into the context of first century Palestine. In reality, it is difficult for you and me to feel the long journey of the Israelites as integral to our own stories, and as part of our spiritual DNA. Similarly, it is tough for us to understand how hard the struggle has been for the Israelites to maintain a faithful response to YHWH against the lure of the Canaanite’s pagan gods.

Just so we can get a little closer to where Jesus is coming from in his conversation with the Canaanite woman, it’s important that we know what it was about the Canaanites that was utterly repugnant to a faithful Jewish man. The Canaanites worshipped among other gods the culturally popular fertility gods often conveniently grouped by the name Baals. Polytheistic worship was, of course, against God’s first commandment given to Moses. In addition, the demeaning acts involved in the worship of the Canaanite pantheon of gods were also condemned in Torah, as were the violent acts of human sacrifice, including child-sacrifice. Arguably, the most radical demonstration against Baal worship is found in the account of 1 Kings 18, where Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to call upon their gods while Elijah calls upon the God of Israel to answer with fire. Despite hours of loud cries accompanied by self-mutilation from the prophets of Baal, it is Elijah’s call that is answered, and Elijah’s offering that is consumed by God’s fire.

As we saw last week, the Israelites lived and worshipped God under the spirit of *shalom* – with the intentions of spreading and sharing God’s peace, goodness and justice to all. Clearly, there was a significant difference between this and the superstitious and violent lifestyle of the Canaanites. I know you can think of many examples from more recent history that give you and me the same feelings about others that the Israelites had about the Canaanites. Consider the tragedy of the millions of refugees in Africa who have fled inter-tribal wars, murder and rape. What about the horror stories of inhumane and abusive labor practices found as far away as China, and as close as the sweatshops of New York City? Then there is the plight of young girls sold into prostitution?

Given the Law and the prophets, the Israelites began to understand a call to monotheistic worship of the one true God, but in addition God’s call to the Israelites to be a light to the nations. With all that history, it really shouldn’t be a surprise that the kind of debauchery practiced by the Canaanites earned them the name of dogs. However, it is noteworthy that there are two terms for dogs used in the Scriptures. The first refers to wild and savage dogs that roamed in packs and were to be

feared; and the second refers to tame housedogs, like our own pets.

The Canaanite woman with the sick child is determined as well as faithful. Her persistence finally earns her a response from Jesus, following quickly on the heels of the disrespect of the disciples. She appears to be a single mom, and refuses to be deflected from her purpose in seeking out Jesus, the healer. Unlike the disciples in this passage, who do not once refer to Jesus as Lord, the Canaanite woman is sincerely deferential and accurate in her address to Jesus, not just as Lord, but also as the Son of David. The term Son of David is a Messianic designation. She kneels before Jesus in a posture of submission and humble worship, and then asks for what she wants, knowing that Jesus can heal her daughter. Our Canaanite woman seems to be well versed about God and to understand the implications of Jesus' words and deeds – perhaps even better than Jesus' disciples did.

In addressing the woman, Jesus uses the diminutive word for dog, the translation for which can easily be puppy, or understood to be a household pet. He is therefore acknowledging that she is a member of the household. The fact that he speaks to her at all is amazing. Not only is the communication of a male Jew with a female socially taboo, she is a foreigner as well. Jesus is once again breaking down the barriers that separate within and between communities. Jesus effectively welcomes this woman into his circle of disciples irrespective of her ethnic origin, but purely and graciously through her faith alone. Apparently as a single mom, this woman also has another cultural strike against her. She has no husband or male benefactor to take care of her and therefore it is certain that she is extremely poor and extremely vulnerable. That makes her one of the most marginalized and isolated members of society. Knowing what it means to scratch a living, she understands perfectly well the implications of making a few crumbs go a long way, and is quick to point out that her poverty does not exclude her right to receive the crumbs even if they are gathered from the floor under the table. Her humility precludes greed. In her deep faith, she already knows that even a few of God's crumbs are the equivalent of a heavenly banquet. Indeed, they are more than sufficient to meet her needs and the needs of her daughter. Jesus' act of healing for one considered unworthy by His disciples, demonstrates the boundless gift of God's grace and unconditional love towards all humanity.

For the purposes of the Matthean community, it appears to be important to the Gospel writer to affirm that Jesus' mission had certain priorities: reframing Torah and calling His own people to repentance and reconciliation with their God first, and then through His death and resurrection, offering God's gift of grace to the whole world. Matthew's Christian community included Christians of both Jewish and Gentile origin. Our Canaanite mother's encounter with Jesus is a bold lesson in the gift of salvation through God's grace and faith in Christ. *Sozo*, the Greek word for "saved" also means healing. Whether we recognize this in ourselves or not, you and I need God's gift of salvation, because we **are** hurt, wounded, and damaged by our own sins and the sins of others. God's gift of salvation to you and me, and to the Canaanite woman and her daughter, is about our restoration and transformation to the fullness of our humanity. Salvation, at the deepest and most foundational level, is and always will be, about healing for you, for me, and for the whole of creation in body, mind and spirit. Praise God, and may it always be so.

Amen.