

Where Does It Stop?

11th Sunday After Pentecost

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Matthew 15:21-28

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In the Gospel lesson we'll hear that Jesus and his disciples go to "Tyre & Sidon" and that they have an interaction with a Canaanite woman – and those descriptions of the place and the nationality of the woman are important markers that the storyteller gives for listening to the story. "Tyre & Sidon" means "not in Israel", so they are away from the typical area where Jesus has been teaching and healing; and "Canaanite" woman means "not Jewish", so it's clear she is of a different religion and ethnicity and culture.

It must have been pretty satisfying to Jesus and his disciples to be at the point that they were, a sense of accomplishment and of purpose. You could put their accomplishments in terms of how **popular** Jesus was – popular with the people - how crowds flocked to Jesus to hear him teach and to seek healing and to be fed. You could put their accomplishments in terms of how **unpopular** Jesus was – unpopular with the establishment, both Jewish and Roman – ruffling the feathers of the elites. Jesus was about something that people and powers alike realized was different, provocative, courageous. They had taken things further than anyone expected, and you could understand if they were ready for a brief break away, a chance to commend themselves for their accomplishments.

“Have mercy!” “Have mercy!” “Have mercy!” “HAVE MERCY!”

It seems Jesus was able to ignore this woman, but the disciples could not – the pleading, the shameless begging, of this woman are irritating and obnoxious to Jesus’ disciples, and they want Jesus to tell her to go away. This is not the disciples’ best moment, but they were doing the best that they could – they’re not trying to be mean, they’re just being practical. Truth is, it was enough of a challenge for the disciples to join with Jesus to save all of Israel – and as much momentum as there was in that ministry, this was no time to complicate things by turning attention to broader arenas of religion and race and culture, which is what the Canaanite woman brought into play. I mean, if we listen to her, then “where does it stop?” – it’s too much. It was nothing personal, this woman just didn’t fit the plan – and it was a good plan - a progressive plan that Jesus was leading.

“Have mercy!” “Have mercy!” “Have mercy!” “HAVE MERCY!”

Jesus – being wise and good (he was the Messiah after all) agrees with his disciples (they loved it when Jesus agreed with them!). Jesus has not even acknowledged the Canaanite woman, but he does acknowledge the concerns of his disciples. Jesus agrees: they have a lot of work to do, saving the lost sheep of Israel, and this woman is not part of the plan. It is not personal, or mean, simply practical and strategic – following God’s plan. Perhaps Jesus talks to his disciples just loud enough for the woman to hear, so that she will get the message. She does not get the message. “Have mercy!” - no longer at a distance, she pushes past the disciples, kneels, “Lord, help me.” And this time what Jesus says IS personal, and IS mean: “I’m not going to take food from the children and throw it to a dog” (after all, if you do that, “where does it stop?”) ; how the woman responds is wise, courageous, strong: “all a dog needs is some crumbs”; how Jesus responds is wise, emotional, abundant: “you are a great and faithful woman.” And the woman’s daughter is freed from a demon; and the Messiah is freed from a plan; and Jesus’s followers...will they be freed too?

We go through our lives – as children of God, as people of faith, as citizens seeking to be faithful, in our circles of relationships near and far, of family and community – and perhaps as we do so we are even seeking to be part of something good, something right and courageous as a church, as a country, in relationships with others – proud of your church, your country, your life.

“Have mercy!” “Have mercy!” “Have mercy!” “HAVE MERCY!”

And then there comes a voice that challenges, irritates, provokes – you are forced to notice people, circumstances, histories, events, peoples, that do not fit where you are placing your energy and attention – your life is interrupted, inconvenienced, challenged, intersected, by a voice, a demand, a need, that was not in the plan. And when that happens...then what happens? Well, the impulse is to ask: “where does it stop?”- that is an insidious question, make no mistake, but it is at least an honest question. It is a question you come up against in yourself, that you hear from others, because it seems true: ‘certainly there is only so far you can go – we can only handle so much challenge or change – only so much you can give up – we all have our limits – right?’ So we dress the question up and try to make it sound bold to mask the half-truth present behind it.

As people of faith when we come up against that question in ourselves or in others – “where does it stop?” - the Holy Spirit by God’s grace unmasks it – the Spirit reveals, calls out that question for what it truly is: a question of fear and scarcity, a question that shuts down life and creativity. And what is so remarkable, mysterious, miraculous, is that the Spirit then shows us a different way to respond through those very voices that interrupt our lives – “Have mercy!” – it is through a plea, through a demand, it is through someone pushing insistently into your life, or kneeling for mercy, or persisting and not leaving you alone – through such a person the Spirit speaks truth. It is as a real person, issue, need pushes its way into our lives, beyond our plans and categories, that the grace of God is pushed into our lives for new possibilities of true humanity, community, compassion, justice. When that happens, the story, the plan, is flipped, because there is not something to be lost or given up or taken from you: “where does it stop?” – instead there is space for life to be revealed, received – there is opportunity to be enriched as a person’s demand, need, pain, yearning, story, courage, life, becomes a part of your own heart and soul.

Let me give you some very particular examples of that. For me as a person who is white, in this culture in which that whiteness is a reality of power and privilege – I hear people of color speak out their stories, their demands and needs. If my response to that is - “where does it stop?” - that frames things as if I am deciding whether to give up or grant something, allow something. But if I can truly listen, then I can receive in those voices a path that leads further and deeper into wisdom and compassion. It is not easy or comfortable, but it is wise and good – it reveals a way that is better, that is more fully human, more fully living into God’s community of grace.

For me as a person who in my male gender has power in this culture, and for me as a person who has learned the very clear framework of male and female for gender. When there are voices who question that gender framework, who demand and need their stories to be heard – if my response is - “where does it stop?” - then I am hearing that as something that inconveniences or threatens me, as something that I must manage and limit. But if I can hear other experiences and stories as gifts, then I can learn to hold who each person is with more grace – even myself!, then I can explore the gifts present in each person with more freedom and gratitude.

For me, and you, when you are in a position of power, the Spirit is speaking to you in the voices and demands of others to turn ‘power over’ into ‘community with’.

But it may be too this day that you are not in a place of power – and so you need to find your voice – you need to demand, plead, push your way into places of power. Don't let anyone ever tell you that your story is too much to hear, that your need is too inconvenient to address, that your demand is too threatening to my plan. Don't let your government or leaders tell you that; don't let your church or theology tell you that, don't let Jesus tell you that – that woman, that day, didn't let her voice be quieted. She is the way of courage and wisdom, of strength and faith – and you have a voice of demand and need and faith that is yours to speak.

“Where does it stop?” – that is the wrong question – and when it is spoken in the half-truth honesty of fear or frustration, ignorance or privilege, the Holy Spirit is present to give us an answer: “where does it stop?” - It doesn't! – God's grace never stops overturning and healing and revealing and teaching and creating. The Holy Spirit speaks within and among us a different, deeper, richer question: “how can true life begin? how can true community grow and flourish?” – that is the creative question of faith: heard in the demands and needs within and around us, held in the love and grace of God which in Jesus Christ shapes us into the beloved community.

Come to the table children and dogs, for loaves and crumbs, to be nourished by God's grace for new beginnings of life in our place and time.

Thanks to be to God. AMEN.