
Heart and Soul ... A Weekly Meditation

July 6, 2014

Faith and Wit

“But she knelt before Him and said, ‘Lord, help me.’”
Matthew 15:25 (Common English Bible)

From images in children’s Bibles to the great paintings of masters the world has had fashioned for us a singular picture of Jesus – one Who is gentle to children, merciful to the sinner and helpful to all in urgent need. The figure of Jesus stands in sharp contrast to a harsh and indifferent world that takes little notice of the poor, hurting and marginalized. God has noticed a desperate world and responded with a gentle lamb in which there is no hatred or deceit. That is the savior we want, that is the savior we get. At least, that is what most depictions of Jesus convey.

Then the careful reader of Matthew’s Gospel stumbles upon this passage. It is like hitting an unnoticed speed bump and the effect is the same; it is jarring. A woman comes to Jesus with an appeal. She uses simple speech, simple words that every one of us knows: “Help me.” They are the words that spring to the lips of anyone in deep trouble and have exhausted all normal resources for help. “Help me.” That is all she has to say. And we nod in agreement that it is enough. What does Jesus answer? He flings to her harsh words, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and toss it to dogs.” It is as though some malevolent person broke into our Bibles in the cover of the night and sought to tarnish the reputation of our Lord.

The woman is not defeated by His words. She does not shrivel-up in embarrassment and hurt and retreat. Quick as a flash she matches His rebuke with her own sharp barb, “Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their masters’ table.” In one singular comment the woman does two things: she acknowledges that Jesus is also her Lord and Master and that, if she be nothing more than a dog in Jesus’ eyes even dogs receive something. As the wonderful preacher, David H. C. Reed once commented, the woman has more than faith. She has wit. Jesus has met His match.

Jesus surrenders, “Woman, you have great faith. It will be just as you wish.” Ah, here is the Lord that we want! So why did Jesus initially refuse the woman? The strongest clue is found in how this Gospel ends: “Therefore, go and *make disciples of all nations*, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19 Common English Bible) The woman is a Canaanite. She is a non-Jew. More, the Jewish people despise the Canaanites. And they have no intention of sharing anything with them, including their God and God’s blessings. Jesus’ refusal to the woman produced what the Jews needed to hear; Jesus has not come for only the nation of Israel. Jesus has come for the world. That day, Jesus invited – by His refusal to her – a woman into the pulpit to declare God’s truth.

Heavenly Father, when we fail to understand the circumstances in our life remind us of the cross of Jesus. May we remember that the cross demonstrates Your love for us even in the midst of difficulty. Amen.

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