

August 16

Friends,

It was good to gather with a two+ dozen St. Gileans and visitors today. For those who were not among us, here is the gist of my homily (and maybe bits left out 😊). I focused on the third reading, from Matthew's gospel, chapter 15:10-28.

The passage begins with the famous statement that it is not what goes IN to a person that defiles them, but what comes OUT of their mouths and how they behave.

Sounds wonderful. But then, immediately, we are told the worst story I know of in the gospels: the story of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman whose daughter is possessed by a demon.

The story is terrible: the woman chases after Jesus and his followers clamoring for attention, a request Jesus dismisses by telling his disciples to shoo her away because his work is with the people of Israel—he does not deign to speak directly to her. Nevertheless, she persisted. She ran around the group to get in front of Jesus, she throws herself at his feet, and begs for him to help her daughter. In reply, Jesus is outright cruel to her, saying she and her daughter are not worth the table scraps the family dog might get. Nevertheless, she persists: she says, yes, but what about what drops in the dirt unheeded while the family eats?

At this, Jesus wakes up at last, looks at the woman, sees the suffering mother, and declaring the greatness of her faith, the healing occurs.

Why on earth did the first Christians remember and tell and write down this story?

Likely, you will hear other preachers say one of three things: this story is actually a funny story of Jesus teasing the woman and she gives as good as she gets—well, at least the woman is shown to be witty and quick, I'll give the preachers who claim this credit on that point. But it doesn't sound much like a hopeful, compassionate message to me.

Or, you might hear that this is a story in which Jesus weighs the truth and authenticity of the woman's desire and her knowledge about who he is—this is the “You are Oz, the great and powerful, and I am lowly alien woman small and meek” version of events. Once she showed that she knew she was undeserving and grateful, she earned his favor. In this interpretation, the only reason she doesn't lick his boots is that he's wearing sandals. I have to say this is not appealing to me either.

You may even be told that she was just a disruption, making a big hullabaloo, and wasn't really to be expected to know how to act; but Jesus condescended to help her because he was willing to overlook her wild, rude, impetuous behavior to just get rid of her—what a swell guy! The old fashioned word “condescension” captures this description, and it is the “Lord Bountiful” tossing coins to the street urchins' view of Jesus. Nice if it happens, I suppose, but only if he's in the mood. Hardly a message to build your life on.

None of these rationalizations help me understand why anyone would think this story is good news and go around saying the most important thing that ever happened to you is that you met a guy who behaved like this. Do you get enthused and encouraged by these explanations? I don't.

So what do I think?

First, the Church did remember and tell this story, and that would have been at a time when there were a considerable number of non-Jews hearing the message about Jesus, so there was something in this story that spoke to the situation those folks were in. The Jesus depicted in the gospels is a human being, a Jewish man of his time and place, subject to the attitudes and prejudices of his day and time, not the “Word made flesh”, perfect in every way, so he's enmeshed in the same circumstances they are and therefore how he—and the woman—behave really matters.

Second, there is the situation we are given: Jesus is instructing his followers about what defiles a person, saying it is not what and how one eats, but what one says and does. What happens next? Jesus makes a mess of himself. He gets into a situation where his teaching says one thing, but his attitude and behavior show

another—a crisis moment! How does he respond? He listens to his own teaching, hard as that is to swallow, (and it would have been as hard for him as it is for us when we get caught saying one thing and doing another)—and he finally faces the facts.

Third, there is the woman herself. In the Greek this story is recorded in, her cries are said to be like the cawing of a crow, her behavior is outrageously intrusive and demanding, unconcerned with convention or good manners. She acts the way people act when they put themselves out to the utmost, what athletes call, “leaving it all on the field”. Whatever happens, she’s done all she can do for the sake of her child. No manners, no polite requests. Just “Jesus help!” in the baldest, most blatant way she can find because nothing, nothing—not her dignity, not her reputation, not her safety—matters. Anything and Everything is on the table for the sake of her child. That, I think, is what breaks through.

But there’s more here, especially for us. And you may not like where I go with this here. You see, in our present day situation, what the woman is saying to Jesus is, “Canaanite lives matter!”. Listen just a little more, even if what I just said makes any of you roll your eyes and try to tune me out.

The mother says my precious daughter is tormented and I will yell and act out and eat dirt and beg on hands and knees for her because she matters. Jesus has to wrestle with how to regard this barrage, because despite his teaching, it is not how he behaves. For him, up until this moment, neither mother nor daughter matter, and he has said so bluntly. Once he comprehends, he responds. It isn’t simply that he gets that the woman thinks Canaanite lives matter—of course she does—what matters is that Jesus (against his habit, upbringing, and social understanding) finally says it himself, for himself and others to hear, “Canaanite Lives Matter”, and acts on it. Just so, again and again, the church has had to be called to account.

This is the reason the church tells this story. The church’s ministry and mission, our proclamation and celebration, our joy and hope is that people matter—especially the ones who haven’t counted—and our task is to make sure we and our companions in Christ get the message for ourselves and say it for ourselves and then live it. The issue back then would have been integrating people into the church who were not like present members—it only works if the present

members are compelled by their faith and the institution that shapes that faith. Ponder that. The leadership, the repository of wisdom and hope (the scriptures), had to be clear and forceful with the present community. The story is really for the church because it is about the church. This gospel story acknowledges how hard the work is to look at the truth, and it lets us also see the result: another victory for the kingdom.

Bringing this all forward is not hard to say, but it is hard to live out. Of course women, people of color, lgbtq people, poor people, disabled people--all the people who get overlooked because it is in the interest of the folks on top of the heap to not see them—of course they think they matter, and I bet everyone here would say so. But what is essential to the Christian life is that we who are so privileged know and say and act like all those people matter by being allies and also by doing things that make up for the past and make better their lives now.

This story about Jesus having to face himself—and doing it—reminds us again and again of what the church needs to believe and say and how it is to act in the present. Canaanite lives matter—Black lives matter. Do you see the present day word here? Of course all people believe they matter, but in our present day American society what is crucial is that white people—like the majority of us right here this morning, who enjoy (often quite unknowingly) advantages too numerous to number and too great to describe—believe it and say it and act like it so that we live as though all lives matter and our social structure changes.

When we do this hard work, we're not joking, or testing, or condescending to allow people to be people—we're being real people ourselves and recognizing we are part of a much larger human family. We are helping equality roll down like water, and equity like an ever-flowing stream.