

Proper 15, Year A

August 17, 2014

Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left Gennesaret and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

I think there is a common belief among most Christians that Jesus could read people's minds. Twice in Matthew's Gospel we are told that Jesus knew what others were thinking (12:25, 9:4). And why not? Jesus was God's son, right? And God knows everything. Therefore Jesus must have had perfect knowledge of everything. He knew God's will, knew people's thoughts; there was nothing that could have surprised him.

And yet we also know that Jesus was *tempted* by the Devil in the wilderness. And if that temptation was **really** a temptation and not a farce, it meant that Jesus truly struggled in that desert with knowing his identity, his calling, and God's will for his life. We know that he agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane to know and follow God's will. Our faith tells us that while Jesus was the Son of God, he was still 100% human, and humanity is fallible. In the Letter to the Hebrews, we read: "Jesus is God's own Son, but still he had to suffer before he could **learn** what it really means to obey God." (Hebrews 5:8) Jesus had to *learn what it really means to obey God*; he didn't know it all to begin with. We are told that the 12-year-old Jesus "grew in wisdom", which means that there must have been some wisdom he didn't have to begin with. (Luke 2:52) Was there a point in Jesus' life when his learning ended, he knew it all, and nothing could surprise him, since he knew everything?

In the 8th Chapter of Matthew, a Roman centurion comes to Jesus and says to him, "Sir, my servant is lying at home paralyzed and in great pain." Jesus says to him, "I will come myself and cure him." But the centurion replies, "Sir, I am not worthy to have you under my roof; just give the word and my servant will be cured." The Gospel tells us that when Jesus hears this he is **astonished** and says to those following him, "In truth I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found faith as great as this." (Matthew 8:6-10)

Jesus was *astonished* to find such faith **outside** of the chosen people of Israel. He had not expected this! His Jewish religion had taught him that the Jewish people were God's chosen, and that God worked through his *special* relationship with his chosen people. Yet here was a *striking exception* that flew in the face of that ingrained cultural and religious mindset in which he had lived his whole life. This pagan gentile had great faith! It didn't compute! Yet the proof was right in front of him, and it **astonished** him.

Fast-forward two chapters to **today's** Gospel reading. Jesus is in pagan territory, and is approached by a Canaanite woman. Now, this would have been alarming to a First-Century Jew, for the Canaanites were the ancient archenemies of the Jews; and women, in Jewish culture, were never supposed to speak to men in public. Add to all this the fact that this *particular* woman is shouting, causing a real disturbance, and you can see how Jesus' training had not predisposed him to react positively to this Canaanite woman.

Like the Roman centurion which I mentioned earlier, this woman wants Jesus to heal someone dear to her: her daughter, who is possessed by demons. At first, obedient Jewish rabbi that he is, Jesus ignores her. Then he says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she persists, kneeling before him saying, "Lord, help me." Jesus answers, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." (The "children", of course, are the Jews, and the gentiles are the dogs.) But the woman replies, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Jesus, once again, is astonished! Her words ring true, yet the whole situation does not jibe with the religious and cultural mindset in which he was steeped, and it doesn't fit into his understanding of his calling as being only to the lost sheep of Israel.

But again, the **fact** of this woman's GREAT faith (as opposed to *Peter's* LITTLE faith in last week's Gospel) is undeniable. Jesus answers her, "'O woman, **great** is your faith! Let it be done for you as you desire.' And her daughter was healed instantly."

My friends, I have struggled with this passage each time I have read it, studied it, preached on it; and I can tell you that Biblical scholars struggle with it also. The way I see it (and I may see it differently a year from now), there are two possibilities: either Jesus is playing some sort of game with this woman, or – the woman changes Jesus' mind.

Listen to what Fr. John Shea says about this passage:

"The disciples... think the *woman* is the problem... However, they are wrong... The problem lies elsewhere. It lies in Jesus' mind. He has construed his identity and mission within the boundaries of Israel and this is a Canaanite woman from

the [pagan] region of Tyre and Sidon. **He** belongs to Israel and the gathering in of the strayed members of that house. This woman is *outside* that house, and so she is of no concern to the savior of the Jews.” (*On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Liturgical Press: Collegeville, MN, 2004, p. 253)

The problem is in Jesus’ mind, and so when he is confronted with the fact that his firmly ingrained cultural and religious mindset is incompatible with God’s compassion, he changes his mind. As in so many other places in the Gospel, Jesus follows God’s compassion rather than the religious mindset in which he has been trained.

What does this say to us?

First, I think it says something about the overpowering nature of our religious and cultural traditions, assumptions, and mindset. If *Jesus* was so enmeshed with the established mindset of his religion and culture, what about you and me? How powerful is **our** ingrained religious and cultural mindset? Jesus had the humility to be *open* to astonishment, to having his mind changed, to reassessing his mission. Perhaps one of the take-homes of this Gospel passage is that Jesus models for us such humility and openness? Richard Rohr says that all saintly persons he has ever known have this characteristic in common: they are willing to admit they might be wrong. In our Gospel reading today, it would appear that Jesus shares this saintly quality.

And yet how this does go against the grain for us!! We are told, from many different quarters, that a person of strong morality and faith never changes her mind. Indeed, as this political election season heats up, we are reminded that changing your mind is tantamount to political suicide. You are seen as weak, as “flip-flopping” on the issues. The “**true** believer” never changes her mind.

And yet there it is in our Gospel lesson. Jesus has his mind changed, and it reflects anything BUT weakness: it is that saintly quality which says, “I may be wrong, and I am willing to have God change my mind if I am; in fact, I hope and pray that God **will** change my mind if I’m wrong!”

And, I believe, that’s the bottom line here. You see, it is really not the Canaanite woman who changes Jesus’ mind; it is **God** speaking *through* her, and it is **this** voice to which Jesus responds. Again, John Shea writes: “Jesus is not usually swayed by the wishes of other people, either Pharisees, disciples, or individual seekers. He is driven only by the will of his Father; that is his food and drink (see John 4:34). He says and does only what he hears from his Father.

“Therefore, it is remarkable to hear him say he will do the will of this woman. Could it be that in this woman’s words he hears the voice of his Father?” (*Ibid.*, p. 255)

Could it be that in the voice of someone who is not part of our in-group, our culture, our denomination, our religion, our political party, who may even be an ancient enemy – could it be the voice of God speaks through such a person?

And could it be that we, like Jesus, might listen to God's word coming to us through that person, and *allow* our minds to be changed?

AMEN