

Twelfth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): "Jesus Encounters a Mother Bear"
Matthew 15:21-28
August 19-20, 2023
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Today's Gospel from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson:

21-22 From there Jesus took a trip to Tyre and Sidon. They had hardly arrived when a Canaanite woman came down from the hills and pleaded, "Mercy, Master, Son of David! My daughter is cruelly afflicted by an evil spirit."

23 Jesus ignored her. The disciples came and complained, "Now she's bothering us. Would you please take care of her? She's driving us crazy."

24 Jesus refused, telling them, "I've got my hands full dealing with the lost sheep of Israel."

25 Then the woman came back to Jesus, dropped to her knees, and begged. "Master, help me."

26 He said, "It's not right to take bread out of children's mouths and throw it to dogs."

27 She was quick: "You're right, Master, but beggar dogs do get scraps from the master's table."

28 Jesus gave in. "Oh, woman, your faith is something else. What you want is what you get!" Right then her daughter became well. (Matthew 15:21-28)

I wish we knew her name. In Bible history she's simply known as the Canaanite woman, or as St. Mark calls her, the Syrophoenician woman, either of which tells us she is "the Outsider" with a capital O. She is not Jewish; she is pagan. She is not "clean," religiously speaking; she is "unclean." That's how she is **different** than Jesus and the disciples. But she is **the same** as mothers of every culture, every place, every time, in that she is a Mother Bear when it comes to protecting her child, being an advocate for her child, going to the mat for her child.

What qualities do **you** see in her??

- Love for her child
- Faith in Jesus' power to heal and save
- Perseverance, persistence
- Puncture-proof ego
- Psychological insight: humbling oneself before the powerful is sometimes the ultimately successful power play.
- Courage to cross boundaries

If you've ever traveled through a passport checkpoint, even in a friendly, English-speaking country, you may have experienced the anxiety of arriving as an outsider. "Will I be admitted?" "If

they let me in, will they let me out again?" It's a little irrational, but not an uncommon fear. In this story, Jesus and the disciples are the outsiders, geographically. They are Jews in Gentile territory. But this gutsy woman, this mother-on-a-mission, is in the role of Outsider as she approaches Jesus. She is crossing a boundary for which there is no passport. She is violating a taboo, the one that forbids a Gentile woman from addressing a Jewish man.

Jesus **doesn't** say, "No problem, I'm here to help!" Jesus doesn't say **anything**. He **ignores** the woman, even though she is pouring out her heart and has addressed him by the messianic title, "*Lord, Son of David.*" He looks right through her. To make the 1st strike-out worse, the disciples lean on the Lord to get rid of her: "*Now she's bothering us. Would you please take care of her? She's driving us crazy.*" Instead of going to bat **for** her, they go to bat **against** her.

Now Jesus **does** say something, but it's **discouraging**, not **encouraging**. He draws a circle that excludes the woman and her daughter when He explains: "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" (Matt. 15:24) Regardless, there's no stopping her: "*...she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.'*" (Matt. 15:25) She doesn't enter into a theological debate like the woman at the well in John's Gospel, she presents herself as a human being in excruciating need of what she truly believes Jesus can give. She's taken her second swing at the ball and then realizes she's struck out again when Jesus responds crushingly, "*It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*" (Matt. 15:26)

I don't want Jesus ever to have said that. It is so far removed from everything I believe about Jesus' embrace being wide enough to encompass everyone. But He did say it. And that dear woman gets up to bat again, knowing she's got 2 strikes against her and 1 chance left. She puts aside the disciples' disdain and Jesus' rejection and keeps her daughter's need foremost in her

mind: *“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”* (Matt. 15:27)

With that, she’s hit a home run.

“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.” (Matt. 15:28)

In addition to all those other qualities we mentioned earlier, this anonymous mother has *chutzpah*, a certain cheekiness that’s teamed up with enough courage to make the most outrageous requests. She’s got determination to keep coming up to bat, in the face of the most ghastly rejection and abysmal failure, fueled by passion for someone or something. So even though we don’t know **her** name, each of us knows the name of at least one person like her: indefatigable in advocacy for others, refusing to give up under any circumstance, armed with a puncture-proof ego in the face of all criticism, endlessly hopeful, tireless in energy, unrelenting in love.

All cultural differences aside, this woman is kin to another woman to whom Jesus said, *“Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well.”* (Matt. 9:22) Unlike the Canaanite woman who **shouted** to get Jesus’ attention, this other woman was silent as a mouse in the midst of a noisy crowd as she crouched down and reached for the hem of Jesus’ robe. (Remember Linda Murphy’s advice when she preached a couple weeks ago? “If you’re hanging on by a thread, make sure it’s attached to the hem of His garment!” The woman with the flow of blood was violating a taboo, too. She also had *chutzpah*; she was another barrier-breacher and boundary-crosser.

We usually think of Jesus as changeless, unchanging. But His encounter with the Canaanite woman changed His mind, expanding His understanding of His mission and those whom He was sent to save. Later on St. Paul would write to the fledgling Christian community in Ephesus, Greece, made up of former Gentiles, former pagans like the Canaanite woman (Eph. 2):

*¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both [Jews and Gentiles] into one and **has broken down the dividing wall**, that is, the hostility between us, ¹⁵...that he might create*

in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace,¹⁶ and might reconcile both to God....

Jesus “has broken down the dividing wall,” and we, His current day disciples, are called to continue that ministry of reconciliation, of peacemaking, of bridge-building, in His name. We are to break down barriers that prevent those who are on the outside looking in from **coming** in, all those Outsiders with a capital O. Almost 30 years ago Holy Trinity **literally** did that by creating barrier-free access to our sanctuary, eliminating the **stairs** that used to lead from the Main Street sidewalk into the sanctuary, replacing them with a **ramp**. The stairs that led from pew level to the Communion rail were also eliminated, replaced with the ramps we use today.

We’re praying and attempting to break down **invisible** barriers as well, like the assumption some folks have that only certain kinds of people are welcomed within church communities. Hence the outdoor signs by the Osborn Ave. ramp and by the literature box on Main St.: “This is Christ’s church. There is a place for you here.” All kinds of barriers need to be removed for Outsiders to become “insiders.” Cesar Chavez who led the United Farm Workers years ago made this memorable comment: “We don’t need to make the wall higher, we need to make the table longer.” The Lord’s Table is the ultimate Table of Welcome, this side of Heaven. All are equal at this Table: beloved children of God, forgiven sinners continually in need of forgiveness, saints-in-progress, folks with limited understanding whom the Holy Spirit longs to enlighten, and people with human prejudices that the Holy Spirit longs to transform. Whenever we’re tempted to judge people because of who they are, where they come from, what they’ve done, or because of a physical or mental disability, we need to throw out, cast out, exorcise the label of “Outsider.” **Then** by God’s grace we can be the genuinely loving and transformative community God calls us to be. **Then** we will be able to extend the welcome we ourselves have received. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham