

Mat 15:10-28 – “Back ‘Atcha, Jesus”

Did you get a chance to watch Pastor Rick Warren yesterday interview Senators Obama and McCain? If you don't recognize any of those names, then see me after church. If you recognize the names of the candidates for President in the United States, but not the other guy, let me tell you that Rick Warren is the pastor of the largest church in the States – Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, CA. They have some 22,000 members! He is also the author of the wildly popular books “The Purpose-Driven Church” and “The Purpose-Driven Life” ... he's sold something like 25 Million copies of the latter.

Rick Warren set up this interview session that was televised in its entirety on CNN in which he was supposed to grill the candidates with some very personal and very hard questions involving their faith and life positions. I think he missed the boat – if he wanted to ask a really tough question he should have asked them to explain the passage from Matthew that we just read!

There's no doubt about it. This passage is one of the toughest there is to deal with. To be sure, it has one of the finest outcomes of any incident in the gospels, but getting to that outcome is difficult and fraught with many pitfalls.

The biggest problem we have is that it presents a Jesus that we really don't like. There are lots of ways that preachers and other faithful Christians try to duck and weave around this problem, but none of them are really satisfying, and some are downright dangerous in terms of bad theology! I'm referring of course to the second part of the reading, in which Jesus is confronted by a woman with a sick daughter. The first part, in which Jesus once more upbraids the Pharisees, not only doesn't give us a problem but even causes us to cheer as he one more time picks apart their concern over rules and lack of concern about the well-being of people under their care.

But the second part – wow! Here's a woman, not only living outside of Jewish territory, but clearly – even pointedly – not even Jewish, approaching Jesus for help. “Lord, have mercy on me”, she cries, seeking help for her tormented daughter, and what does Jesus do? He ignores her. Perhaps even turns his back on her so he doesn't have to acknowledge her pleas for help. And then it gets worse! When the disciples urged him to send her away because she was bothering them, Jesus claims, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

That's not exactly the Jesus we think we know, is it? That isn't even the Jesus we want to hear about. In fact I'd be willing to bet that there is at least one of you right now who is upset with me for making you have to deal with it! If that's you, you're not alone – Christians of all sorts, preachers too, even the best of the commentators look for ways to ease the conflict between the Jesus we want to love and the Jesus who is presented here in scripture. Perhaps the most common way that is used to ease that tension is to claim, “oh, Jesus had a twinkle in his eye, and he was just saying what he did to emphasise her faith” ... but if you stop and think for even half a second that explanation is worse than the problem, for with that explanation now Jesus is just toying with a woman who is in a desperate and desperately sad situation – intending to cause her more grief and pain to serve his own ends. That is certainly not a Jesus I would care to know and love.

The real miracle in this story is not that Jesus cured the woman's daughter, even from a distance. The real miracle is that this story was written into scripture, and that over the course of almost two thousand years has not been edited out. It is an unflattering story, an episode that challenges us and makes us uncomfortable, and yet it is a story of the magnificent grace of God at work in Jesus. In showing us how Jesus could – gasp! – change his mind, it helps us to

understand that God can, and does, - gasp!! - change his mind. There are many, many devout and faithful Christians who labour under the misunderstanding that God is rigid, inflexible, and doesn't change his mind or intent. The most common example of this is the creed that rolls off so many tongues, and is most often heard in times of confusing sadness ... "everything is part of God's perfect plan." Again, pause for just a moment and consider the down side of such a position. If that were true, if every single little thing that happens on the planet was unrolling as part of some perfect plan of God, then why (as I love to ask people who believe this) even bother to pray? If it were truly the case that God is immutable (cannot change) then the only prayer that makes any sense at all is "please, God, help me to accept everything because you and I can change nothing."

Thank God that scripture is full of occasions when God repented, and changed his mind and actions. So why should we be surprised that Jesus here repented, and changed his mind and actions in response to the worshipful praise and pleading from the woman? And lest we miss just how important that change was, the gospel authors do their best to make sure we understand that importance, both by emphasising the setting and the contrast between the woman and people of faith, Pharisees and disciples alike.

In the larger setting, recall this incident takes place shortly after Jesus and the disciples arrive on the "far" shore after that terrifying night crossing, with a storm and waves and Jesus appearing walking on the water and Peter challenging him and sinking. Crowds swarmed around Jesus, and were healed just by touching the hem of his cloak. In the midst of all of that celebration and demonstrations of the power of God at work in Jesus, the Pharisees - bless their faithfully legalistic hearts! - challenge Jesus about his "unholy" disciples, who apparently were committing the sin of not washing their hands before meals. Jesus goes off on the Pharisees, even calling them hypocrites to their faces, and declares a radical new way of understanding what is holy and what is profane. And then "wham!", a woman, a non-Jewish woman at that, in effect says, "back 'atcha, Jesus" and declares to him a radical new way of understanding what is holy.

For whatever reason, Jesus and his disciples had gone off into foreign territory, the district of Tyre and Sidon, where they encountered the foreign woman. To make sure we understand just how foreign the woman was, the gospel authors point out that she was a Canaanite - a really strange and archaic label to put upon her, a name sure to invoke sharp memories of scriptural injunctions in the Law and the Prophets against associating with Canaanites, traditional enemies of the Jews. Given how extremely this woman was not to be associated with by any religious Jew - on the basis of being a woman, a foreign woman at that, and not just foreign but not a "nice" foreign - any righteous person could understand that Jesus should and would have nothing to do with her, and at first he doesn't - even though she deliberately and specifically identifies him as the Messiah. "Son of David" she calls him, a term any righteous Jew would immediately recognize as naming him Messiah.

And now the identification of Jesus is complete. The disciples, having witnessed the miracle on the water and having been delivered safely on the far shore, declare to Jesus, "Truly you are the Son of God." The unnamed woman completes his messianic identity with her declaration that Jesus is the Son of Man, and her faith is rewarded as her daughter is delivered from her torment. Reading these two incidents together, we can no longer be in any doubt that Jesus is truly the Messiah, Son of God and Son of Man.

Why then has the church not yet caught on? Why then after two thousand years of reading these two incidents back-to-back, complete with the revelation to the righteous that they

don't get it in the middle, does the church still turn its back on those who would call Jesus "Lord", ignore their pleas for help, and claim that God's redeeming love does not cover them? I guess we're slowly getting there, but it's been a long, long time and such very little progress. That unnamed woman has been joined over the years by all kinds of people rejected by the church as somehow unworthy of God's love. Faithful disciples over the centuries have also implored Jesus to send away those deemed unlovable – women, the mentally ill, believers in other ways/doctrines/faiths, the poor, and the unexcited. Today of course the righteous wrestle with how to effectively exclude people of 'different' sexual identities.

That is the real shock and sadness of this incident in scripture – not that we meet a Jesus who makes us uncomfortable because he changed his mind, grew with the moment, and displayed the powerful acceptance of God's grace and love, but that we see reflected in this passage all those who start at the same unaccepting place that Jesus did and who sadly cannot change as he did. That's the real discomfort here, that just perhaps we might be wrong in believing that Jesus and God are somehow rigid, inflexible, unchanging, and exclusive. Having to accept that God and Jesus are flexible, adaptable, passionately responsive and (gasp) inclusive would mean that we can no longer be inflexible, rigid, unchanging, and exclusive. That's the real kicker that results from that woman coming back at Jesus.

Far from being an uncomfortable incident that somehow diminishes Jesus and the power of God at work in him, this is an uncomfortable incident that does quite the opposite. One more time the unlimited, unbounded love and grace of God is shown clearly; once more the power of God's grace to overcome even the interferences of the most righteous shines brightly for all to see. Our hope and promise is that we too are accepted in our faith, no matter how much of an outsider we may feel we are. Our calling in faith is to reach out and make sure that all others hear that they too are accepted in their faith – are welcome at the Lord's table – no matter how much of an outsider we may feel they are.