

Mat 15:10-28 – “Jesus For Whom?”

Once again I face one of preaching’s challenges. It’s a fairly common challenge and is, I think, quite understandable given the history of the Reformed church. Nevertheless, this challenge does present some difficulties for preaching. That challenge? It’s that we take our scripture “seriously.” Now before you begin emulating Jenny Geddes and start throwing chairs at me, please let me explain what I do – and don’t – mean by “seriously.”

As part of the church that derives its heritage from the sacrifices of not only reformers but of passionate faithful such as Wycliffe, Tyndall, Huss, and other martyrs who were killed for their efforts to make it possible for you to read the Christian Bible in your own language, we are indeed serious about our scriptures. That is right and proper, especially since we understand our scriptures to reveal to us God’s involvement with people, God’s love for people, and God’s will and desire for the people.

However, we somehow have drifted from being serious about how important our scriptures are to being deadly serious in our approach and interpretation. By that I mean that we have kind of adopted a “sour and dour” attitude, believing that detecting any hint of humour in our reading is somehow blasphemous; that expressing any amusement as we read the scriptures somehow reflects either a lack of faith or a corrosion of our faith.

I bring this up because I often see an ironic humour both in what the principal characters in scripture said and did and also in how the authors have presented it. One classic example from the Old Testament is the story of God’s encounter with Abraham and Sarah, when Sarah laughs openly at the suggestion she would in her old age bear a child – and more so that the name given to the child is “Laughter.” But there are many examples in the New Testament as well, and I see today’s reading from Matthew’s gospel as one of them. Putting the two incidents in this reading together is, I believe, Matthew’s way of highlighting the irony presented by both.

We can better understand these two incidents when we recognize that they immediately follows a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees, who grumbled and complained that his disciples didn’t wash their hands before they ate. Now remember that to the uptight religious of Jesus’ day, such a practice was not merely good hygiene or social nicety, it was a required religious ritual. Failing to wash one’s hands meant the person was unclean not only in the eyes of fellow diners, but unclean in the eyes of God, and not worthy to sit at the table. Jesus doesn’t so much argue the point as he turns another of their tight little rules back on them, showing how their rules regarding honouring mother and father contradict themselves, and revealing his righteous attackers as being hypocrites.

This is where we enter the story, as Jesus expands his counter-attack on the Pharisees. Now he takes the issue public and calls the crowd together to declare that it is not what goes into the stomach that defiles a person, but what comes out of the heart that defiles. Now, if you approach this text all somber and without the possibility of humour, you will hear the disciples question Jesus, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” But imagine with me for a moment how it more likely happened – same words, but offered in a different way. This time, picture Jesus in full indignation, finding ways to poke verbal holes in the rigid, stuffy, care-nothing-for-the-people religious pomposity of the Pharisees ... and getting so carried away with the attack that he starts to go ‘viral’, to broadcast his challenge openly to the gathering crowds. This could rightfully be described as inciting to riot, and the disciples are getting very, very nervous. Picture them tugging at Jesus’ sleeve, trying to get his attention, to get him to ‘cool it’ for a moment. Now do you not hear the words, “Do you know that the

Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" in a slightly different way? Same words, but now there's some life to them, some fear, some trepidation.

And with that new sense there's some realism to Jesus' reaction – his attack gets even sharper and deeper, going so far as to hint that the Pharisees are not "of God" and even more that they are doing the opposite of what they think they are doing - "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." Wow! No wonder Jesus soon left for the boonies and safety, either dragged or pushed by his disciples. In that new setting, the regions of Tyre and Sidon, comes the text we read today, the episode of a woman, and a foreign woman at that, receiving acceptance from Jesus and healing for her daughter. This odd little story with its curious and strange details sets the ironic counterpoint against the incident with the Pharisees, highlighting not only the difference between the two groups but also re-emphasising what Jesus had said to and about those who saw faith as being about rules.

Matthew begins by identifying her as a Canaanite, which is an unusual use of an ancient term. His use of the term is almost in the same category as us describing someone as Cro-Magnon, or Neanderthal. Maybe a better analogy would be our calling someone a Visigoth, or a Tatar, or a Hun. Perhaps a contemporary analogy would be calling her a "native." But you get the picture, I think. Matthew deliberately chooses a derogatory term, perhaps to deliberately emphasize her non-Jewish non-status through invoking Scriptural images of the old Israelite/Canaanite conflict, and Scriptural images of the prohibitions against having anything to do with "them dirty old Canaanites"! I cannot emphasize enough how with those few words the picture Matthew paints of her so clearly labels her as an outsider, one of "them". A woman, and a foreign woman at that – without question the "lowest of the low."

Just as astounding, or perhaps even more so, are the words on her lips. "Lord, Son of David", she cries to Jesus, "have mercy on me!" Her begging for mercy is not unusual, but her use of the term "Lord, Son of David" is most unusual. She is identifying Jesus not merely as an Israelite, but is using a messianic title to do so. She, a woman, a foreign woman at that, is proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed one, the Christ. His own people haven't done that yet. Even the disciples haven't professed him yet as such, although their declaration in the boat came really, really close. The implication is more than astounding: here, from a woman, a foreign woman, comes the first proclamation of Jesus as Messiah, as Christ. This nobody, this 'outsider' not only can see what the 'insiders' cannot, but professes it loudly and publicly.

And that leads us into an episode rife with painful harshness and embarrassment, difficult to understand, and to explain. The woman begs Jesus for mercy, and he ignores her. I'm not making this up, the text says, "But he did not answer her at all." The disciples go further, "she's a nuisance, send her away!". It's not clear whether Jesus is answering the disciples or the woman with his curious, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" but it seems most likely that he is speaking to her. Was he finally embarrassed out of his silence by the disciples forcing the issue? We can't know for sure. In any event, Jesus finally speaks to her dismissively, but she's not ready to let it go, and makes yet another plea for help. Jesus tries to put her off, this time using an highly unflattering analogy about throwing children's food to the dogs. Whoa! How denigrating can you get?! This sounds like a real putdown, doesn't it? "You misbegotten mongrel of a dog, you are not worthy of my attention!" But she's still not deterred, and now – note the irony! - using the same technique he has so recently used with the Pharisees she comes right back at him with a counter-example about the dogs eating the crumbs from the master's table.

I'm sure you've had instances when you have been arguing with someone, and they have neatly hoisted you on your own petard, haven't you? There's that hugely uncomfortable moment when you realize your opponent has just used your own behaviour as an example to destroy your argument, and you realize you have no way out except to concede the point. Such forced self-awareness is uncomfortable, it is unnerving, but it is also a moment of huge growth. Whether this was such a moment for Jesus we may never know, but we do know he reversed his position completely, commended her faith and gave her the mercy and healing that she sought.

People over the last two thousand years have sought a way to relieve this story of its awkwardness and embarrassment. Some claim Jesus was just testing her faith. Others claim that he was bringing her to an 'appropriate' humility, as if she hadn't suffered enough already. Both of those approaches create more problems than they solve, because they both put Jesus into a very negative light, even if the proponents are trying to prove the 'perfection' of Jesus. I'm more comfortable with the concept that this was a 'growing moment' – if not for Jesus, then at least for his disciples – a moment when possibly his understanding of his own mission expanded, but certainly the understanding by his disciples expanded – thus wrapping up the earlier question from Jesus to them, "Are you also still without understanding?"

This struggle about whether or not to include foreigners is nothing new within the church. The first conference (first General Assembly?) of the church was to debate precisely this issue, namely whether to admit Gentiles who did not first become Jews. Peter, up until his vision at Joppa, was firmly against admitting these Gentile heathens into the church. From his vision, however, he came to a new understanding that God's grace and mercy was for all who would respond in faith. Paul fought long and hard to proclaim his understanding that in Christ there is "neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek". Luke's whole gospel spreads the word of God's redemption like ripples in a pond, "Jerusalem, Judea, and to the ends of the earth". And of course, this is not a new struggle in the new church, for we even heard Isaiah proclaim that eunuchs and foreigners were included as part of God's people.

The proclamation of these texts, the proclamation of God through his prophets, through his Son, Christ our Lord, is clear: God's love, mercy and grace is for all who respond, who worship him, who try to respond to his grace by living a life consistent with that mercy and love. It's difficult to understand sometimes why people of faith see this as a radical and difficult concept, and why people keep wanting to revert to a system of religious rules that divide, exclude and drive away. Time and time again, the church has needed to be reminded that the answer to the question "Jesus for whom?" is everyone – everyone who will hear, and respond in faith. Not a faith defined by ritualistic observances, but a faith that believes that Jesus offers reconciliation with God, offers the gift of life and life abundant.

The church has continued to wrestle for years over this concept – some on the one hand defending the "purity" of faith as expressed in particular rituals, others arguing that we need to be open to all kinds of new understandings. With each new group of "outsiders" that are accepted and incorporated into the church changes are inevitable, and change is highly uncomfortable.

I've discovered that sometimes I have to be careful of my enthusiasm, and this might be one of those times. I once was impressed with a sudden awareness that being enthusiastic about implementing new understandings can be seen by some as a criticism that they haven't moved "far enough, fast enough". I now realize that being enthusiastic about a life or faith concept that calls for changes can upset two groups of people: those who are already practicing the concept, and those who aren't (pretty much the whole waterfront, eh?)!

To those of you who are practicing the kind of inclusiveness called for in this episode in the gospel, I would say, “well done!” and “perhaps we can talk about a bit of tuning on the finer points.” Many of those finer points adjust themselves when the foundational understandings are reinforced. The role of language, for example – it is so easy to talk about ‘them’, whoever ‘them’ is, but by doing so we put an automatic division between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Instead of talking about “inviting ‘them’ in”, it is so much better, so much more consistent with God’s call to us in Christ, to personalize it into “inviting ‘you’ in”. Changing ‘them’ to ‘you’ is more than half-way to changing it to ‘us’.

To those of you who see such an understanding of inclusiveness as being a threat to your faith, calling into question long-held and deeply-held beliefs, I would offer assurances. Recall the depth and breadth of God’s mercy and love shown so clearly in Scripture. Recall how not only the Israelites struggled and grew in their faith, how even the disciples moved from naivety to a new and deeper faith in Christ as he challenged them, how the church as a whole moved to a broader and deeper understanding of the scope of God’s redeeming love in Christ. Recall how in this process, as Paul proclaims, “there is nothing that can separate you from the love of God in Christ.”

All of us can rejoice that this understanding of God is not some trendy new invention, but is proclaimed in Old and New Testaments alike. We can give thanks, especially as Gentiles, that the church came to understand that Gentiles also – that we – are welcome at the Lord’s table. Give thanks to God that we have heard, and can pass on, God’s wondrous message in Christ: “Who am I for? I came for you.”