

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 15 - Year A - 8.16.20 - The Rev. Susan S. Gaumer

Isaiah 56:1,6-8, Psalm 67, Romans 11:1-2a,29-32, Matthew 15:21-28 August 16, 2020

I believe we've just heard the most startling conversation in all of Holy Scripture! Jesus is challenged by a Canaanite woman pleading that he heal her child. He says nothing while his disciples shriek "send her away!" Then Jesus blows her off saying "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel"—only to the Chosen people, his people, the Jews. But she persists, kneeling before him, "Lord, help me." And he replies "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Dogs held no place of favor in Jesus' day as they do for us as pets unless they were helping to herd sheep. Suggesting the woman was a "dog" was to dishonor her. She persists, again calling him Lord, saying "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" thus acknowledging her low status in Jesus' mind. I think there is a pause here while Jesus considers what has just taken place. He has really seen and heard the woman finally, taken in her vulnerability despite having no status in his culture, no acceptable identity. Jesus has seen her for what she is, a desperate mother pleading for her child. The woman honors him by calling him Lord, kneeling at his feet in total subjugation. Then he does the unthinkable for a Jewish rabbi, he accepts the Canaanite woman's faith in him and heals her daughter instantly. Done!

This is Jesus' "Canaanite lives matter" moment—or better, "Gentile lives matter" for in ancient times all non-Hebrew people were called Gentiles. Jesus clearly changes his mind here about for whom his ministry is intended. He gets it! God wants him to be the healing savior for ALL people, even those who worship foreign gods and idols, even those who do not adhere to Jewish Law; even the "dogs." It's an extraordinary change of heart on Jesus' part. His disciples were no doubt reeling with surprise and anger. "How could he do this?" What will people think? But real healing happened here: The woman's daughter got well; the woman's pleas were validated and so, therefore, was she; and Jesus moved beyond the cultural exclusivity Judaism had professed for centuries. "Gentile lives matter."

If you need Jesus to have had it together all the time, to be immune from changes of mind and heart, this passage is not for you! Jesus' humanity is revealed in stark, dramatic terms here, a challenging wrestle with his vocation with serious implications for him and for his followers chronicled throughout the book of Acts and the writings of Paul. Not easy this profound counter-cultural inclusivity—God loving the unchosen, Jesus here for us all.

Quite a message. Whom do we see and not see? Hear and not hear? That is a strange question to ponder in these times of dramatic separation from others as we avoid catching or passing on COVID-19. It strikes me as ironic that in America we have come face to face with the depth of racism at the very same time we are avoiding human contact. Legitimate protests against racial inequality are going on while the rest of us shelter at home. Maybe it is God's way of waking us up to the sins of our own people, to the suffering that has been going on for generations that some just didn't see or didn't want to see, didn't hear or want to hear. Like Jesus on that day with

the Canaanite woman we need to see the truth about those who differ from us and to come to terms with the harder truths about ourselves.

Years ago I was called in to Ochsner Hospital in New Orleans because a family wanted an Episcopal priest to visit. When I got there I met a woman suffering from cancer; her husband was there and two adult children. It turned out they were members of the Poarch Creek Indian tribe from Atmore, Alabama. She was the matriarch. I had driven past the interstate exit for Atmore numerous times and even noticed the small sign that said “Indian reservation,” but had never paid any attention to it. A few weeks later a member of her family called me to come to the hospital again as their chief lay dying. When I got there there were 26 members of the tribe in the waiting area. I went into her room, anointed her and said prayers with her gathered immediate family and then joined the group waiting outside. We stood in a circle, joined hands, prayed together and even sang a bit. Then I invited them to share the fondest things they would remember about their matriarch. They told wonderful stories about her leadership and shared their worries that there was no one as educated and skilled as she was to help them deal with the complexity of being native Americans on a reservation in the 21st century. I had passed that reservation dozens of times without having the slightest idea about who these people were or what they were about. In those holy moments in that circle the invisible became visible to me—good folks losing a beloved leader. As we held hands in that beautiful circle, their chief departed this life.

The truths we don't see can take us by surprise—as they should. Maybe a good outcome of these difficult times will come from a deeper identification with the suffering of others whom we haven't really seen before—those whose lives are harder than ours, compromised by discrimination, diminished opportunity, disability. If we can come through this with a deeper acceptance of the vulnerability of ALL children of God, including ourselves, we will have learned something valuable, just as Jesus did in his encounter with the Canaanite woman. So let us pray today: Lord Jesus Christ, open our eyes to see those whose suffering has been invisible to us. Help us find ways to support and to comfort them. Open our hearts to accept them and give us the grace to love them as you do—unconditionally, with nothing held back. In your Holy Name we pray this day. Amen.

Who do you say that I am? Abraham and Sarah had an answer, Isaiah had an answer, the psalmist had an answer, Peter had an answer as did Paul. Who do you say that God is? Only you can know your answer. God is present with you as you seek the answer.