

Proper 18, September 9, 2012

Nigel Taber-Hamilton

I love my dog, Toby. He – like most dogs (and cats) I have known – has displayed an almost innate ability to find tender places in my heart.

At least, that's how it looks to me! Some of you have your dogs out in your cars this morning – I'm guessing you know where the shade is, and park there – you care about what might happen to them.

Animal behaviorists might explain it differently – those who study the origins of human–canine interaction have suggested that dogs domesticated us – it was a natural way to ensure their survival! But for those of us who have – or have had – dogs in our homes, we know that they're not really pets but members of the family.

So when we hear Jesus say the bit about taking away children's food and giving it to the dogs we probably agree in principle, but that's because we're going to feed our dogs later.

Of course, Jesus was speaking metaphorically – the “children” were clearly meant to represent Israelites, and the “dogs” non-Jews.

It seems a bit harsh of Jesus to compare the Greek woman and her child to dogs, but when we learn that he used a diminutive – “puppies” – it seems a little more cosy.

I offer this metaphor to you somewhat tongue in cheek, inviting you to remember who the children and dogs represented (!): Like any misunderstood dog, assumptions can come back and bite you!

In our culture, Jesus might have said this: “Let Americans have the first crack at local jobs. It's morally wrong to take American jobs and offer them to those cockroaches from across the border.”

The Greek woman has a tough skin and I'm guessing she's earned it by bitter experience! She's thrown herself at his feet and begged for help and he's insulted her and yet she doesn't back down! She doesn't back down because she's desperate; she challenges his metaphor with one of her own and – I think with a smile – he gives in and gives her what she has asked for – healing for another.

This is not the all-compassionate Jesus we're used to hearing about, is it? What's going on?

It's quite possible that Jesus is acting out a parable rather than speaking it. One of the significant components of a parable is “reversal” – we all expect a particular outcome but get the opposite. It is not a fellow Jew who is compassionate toward the man lying near death on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem (and Jesus' Jewish Listeners would have been outraged that their fellow Jews ignored the Law's demand that they help the wounded man) – it is not a fellow Jew but a hated Samaritan who helped him. Thoughtful Jews would have figured out pretty quickly that if

those they hated could be more compassionate than those they loved, the world was being turned upside-down by God! What next?! That you needed to love those you hated?

I chose the story of the Good Samaritan because of the very significant parallels with this story – it is, as it were, Mark’s “Good Samaritan”, in the impression left on Jesus’ companions. Look at those parallels: The main protagonist wasn’t Jewish. She was seeking a compassionate and healing outcome for another. She was certain that God of Jesus – certainly not her god – could help.

The person working assiduously to help an innocent was not Jewish. Those Jews present with Jesus would have approved of his initial handling of this Greek woman – yes, send her away without granting her request! He has authenticated their racism. Yet her love for another; her compassion and commitment to seek help even from someone outside her kinship group, her religion and her ethnic community; and her willingness to do this in the face of a demeaning insult – all this, Jesus said, was worthy of respect and a compassionate response.

So – no doubt to the shock of Jesus’ companions – he admires the woman’s spunk and her quick and witty riposte, and gives her what she asks for: healing for her daughter.

I think there are number of learnings for us here that are very important in our own lives:

- The depth of the woman’s faith and commitment is profound and moving. Can we say that we would be willing to act toward foreigners the way she did? Would we be willing to engage outsiders – non-Americans, non-caucasians – with the same intensity and willingness to offer respect, even in the face of initial rejection?
- Can we hear the proclamation of God’s love for the outsider?
- Are we willing to accept that God’s healing now embraces everyone regardless of difference; that all are touched by God?
- Do we have the patience and persistence to “keep at it” even when confronted by initial rejection?

And we shouldn’t limit this invitation simply to our personal lives. Healing cuts across boundaries and takes many forms. This little parable invites us to expand rather than contract our vision of healing to embrace the healing of the planet’s atmosphere, endangered species, economic injustice, ethnic exclusion, as well as the healing of bodies, emotions, and spirits. Healing is truly global and indivisible.

How far are we willing to go, how much are we willing to accept insults and ridicule, to seek that healing promised by God?

What sort of stewards are we?            Amen