Sermon – Trinity Everett and Holy Apostle’s – 10th Pentecost – Year A

I am blessed being a grandparent. This summer has been a tremendous joy: going to baseball games, attending violin lessons, and just hanging out with my two grandkids. Their well-being and welfare are an integral part of my soul.

In today’s gospel passage a distraught mother is worried sick as her precious child is tormented by a demon. Her child is her life. She is determined to do anything for the well-being of her child.

The woman is a Canaanite, a Gentile. Gentiles were long-standing enemies of ancient Israel. She comes from the coastal region of Syria, where strange gods are worshipped. Ritual laws of cleanliness are unknown. As a female she had no social standing, no authority, and no status. She is both an outsider and an untouchable.

She engages Jesus in one of the most remarkable encounters of his ministry.

With courage and hope the woman steps out of her comfort zone. As she meets Jesus she shouts: “Have mercy on me. Lord, Son of David”. She recognizes him as the Messiah.

We are shocked and surprised at Jesus’ response. We expect so much more of him.

It seems that in his humanness he is having a downright bad day. He is rude and insulting. Initially, he ignores the Canaanite woman. His lack of kindness is disturbing.

As the disciples urges Jesus to send her away, it appears that he is focused simply on himself. That he needs to expend his energy exclusively on the people of Israel. He feels no responsibility to the Gentiles. He makes no effort to help this nameless outsider. His perspective is limited.

Can we identify with that? Life is often interrupted by people and situations that make inconvenient demands on our time and plans. When such interruptions threaten us, do we duck the call, take another route home, or refer the problem to someone else? If we avoid the unpleasant interruptions in life, are we missing something important that God has for us to learn?

The woman is insistent. She comes and kneels before Jesus merely sayings: “Lord help me!”

I can imagine Jesus saying to himself, “No, Lord help me! Enough is enough. This woman is not a sheep of our fold. She is just not getting it. I am not here to help her.

Sometimes we forget that Jesus was fully human, with a full range of human emotions. Imagine how discouraged he might be… how tired of everyone wanting something of him. He needs to solely focus on his understanding of God’s will for him.

It is something we probably all feel at one time or another --- when the phone keeps ringing with charity appeals or on-going requests that keep coming in the mail. We have to decide where our priorities are. .

Jesus becomes defiant. He harshly refers to Gentiles as dogs: who are not worthy to receive the same food and benefits that his ministry provides to the Jews.

The woman persists. She will not be deterred. She does not take offense at what Jesus has said. She knows who he is. She knows that only Jesus can heal her daughter. She again addresses him as Lord, as she points out: “even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their Master’s table.” She does not deny that Jesus’ ministry to the House of Israel. The abundance of God’s blessings still leaves much for the Gentiles.

As Jesus acknowledges her faith, he grants her request. “Woman great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

We begin to relax and sit back into our pews as we recognize the lessons of this rich passage: great faith, compassion, discernment, the need to reach out to the ever-expanding family of God, and so much more.

We are basically tribal. Our tribes may be family, social, political, economic, or religious. Each tribe we belong to has its’ own boundaries and limits, its own rules and expectations.

And we like that.

We find safety and comfort in our tribes: we know where we stand. We trust that the other members have our backs. It is good to know there are people who think and believe like we do.

And we become pretty defensive about our tribes. We believe that we got it right. We got it figured out. We are convinced that God is on our side. We can’t imagine anyone not thinking or seeing things the same way we do.

So we refuse to open our tribe to include anyone outside. You can become part of us --- but on our terms. This can lead to maintaining the status quo.

In her courage and wisdom, the Canaanite woman bridges the gap among the various tribes she has been shut out of. She crosses the gap between being an insider and outsider, Jews and Gentiles, “children” and “dogs”.

Have we noticed the difference between the times we hang back in our comfort zones and the times we move out --- pushing into new and often scary territory. It means putting ourselves in the path of strangers, being the first to extend your hand, trying new things, changing your mind.

At times it can be uncomfortable --- as the Canaanite woman reaches out to Jesus.

Uncomfortable as Jesus hears a Canaanite woman call him Lord, when his own family would not.

Uncomfortable as it was for Jesus to step beyond generations of traditions and responds to her faith.

Uncomfortable as it is for us to step over the lines we have drawn to protect ourselves and explore unknown terrain.

God calls us to step out in faith: Look a Canaanite in the eye, knock on a strange door, ask an outsider what his life is like, enter a new relationship, take a risk, give up playing life safe --- to live a life of compassion and forgiveness.

With the Canaanite woman and Jesus as our models --- we are called to step over the lines we have drawn for ourselves. We know that God waits for the other side of us.

Resources:

Connections: August 17, 2014

Feasting on the Word of Matthew

Sermon: The Rev. Esther Poirier – August 18, 2002

Sermons that Work: 10 Pentecost, Year A, 2013

Synthesis: August 17, 2014

The Seeds of Heaven, by Barbara Brown Taylor