

Genesis 45:1-15

Matthew 15:21-28

TURNING INSIDE OUT

An old Irish priest was very anti-British. So much so that the Cardinal had to call him in and demand that he never mention the British from his pulpit again. Apparently the old priest understood for he said, "Sure, your eminence. I'd never do anything to embarrass you. I'll never mention the dirty British again. The Cardinal responded to his acceptance of the admonition with a reconciling invitation to give the sermon at the next High mass in the Cathedral. The text was on the Last Supper and the old priest gave an extremely dramatic portrayal, ending with Jesus' declaration that one of the disciples would betray him. "The blessed St. Peter asked, 'Is it I?' And the Lord said, 'No, no, my son, it's not you.' And the blessed St. John asked, 'Is it I?' And the Lord said, 'No, it's not you.'" And the old priest went through the other remaining disciples until he said, "Then the thieving, conniving, black-hearted Judas said, 'I say, old boy, is it I?'"

As that story suggests and, as we know all too well, humankind is fraught with barriers and boundaries between them and us. There are "folks just like us that we like," who are on the inside with us; and then, there are those others, who are not like us and whom we don't like (and perhaps whom we even fear or mistrust) that are on the outside, over there, across the tracks. There's this pervading and sinful sense of "You stay on your side and we'll stay on our side, and everything will be just fine."

Only it's not fine! It's not at all what God intends for the creation. The biblical record, from beginning to end, is all about God reconciling the world to God's self and to one another, of bringing people of different backgrounds together instead of keeping them apart. God is in the business of breaking down fences and building up community.

That being the case, the gospel lesson for today is difficult to digest because it shows Jesus in a different light from the way he is usually depicted in scripture. We are more familiar (and comfortable) with Jesus taking the initiative, reaching out, and accepting tax collectors and sinners, lepers and other outcasts on the margin of society, women and children. That's what we love about Jesus; that's what sets him apart from the other religious authorities of his day. He ministered to the multitudes that pressed around him, clamoring for his attention. No one was left out when it came to the grace of God. He was never too busy to stop and address human need, to give of himself for the sake of others, to put their needs before his own.

However, Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman, who came to him and begged for mercy on behalf of her daughter because she was tormented by a demon, is an exception to the rule. We don't see Jesus at his best. This Jesus appears to be exhausted, empty, and in need of rest. In the exchange, Jesus doesn't come off as being kind and open toward the woman. Instead, he seems rude, insensitive, and curt.

Jesus and his disciples had traveled beyond the bounds of their own nation and had stepped foot inside the district of Tyre and Sidon, which was gentile territory. Even though they had

crossed national boundary lines, Jesus' reputation as a healer had preceded him there for a Canaanite woman came to Jesus and beseeched him to heal her daughter of an evil spirit. She pleaded for mercy and presented her case to him saying "Lord, Son of David," which showed great respect and recognized Jesus' unique authority.

And, what did Jesus do? He ignored her. He paid no attention to her request. When the woman still persisted (after all, a mother's love and concern for her ailing child knows no limits!), the disciples tried to shut her up and shoo her away. Another time, when the disciples tried to prevent the children from coming to Jesus, he was indignant and told his disciples in no uncertain terms, "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:14). But this time around, with the Canaanite woman, Jesus didn't reprimand his disciples. Instead, he reinforced their behavior and justified his own by stating emphatically, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

You've got to admire this helpless Canaanite woman, who wouldn't take "No," for an answer. She refused to be put off and turned away. She pressed the issue harder and further by kneeling before Jesus, and she begged him saying, "Lord, help me." Did Jesus respond to her plea of desperation? Well, yes, but not in his customary way of compassion. He responded to her cry for help by saying, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Even though some have tried to play this down by suggesting that Jesus was really referring to a household pet (a puppy, if you will) instead of an outdoor scavenger, nevertheless, it was still a slur in any language.

So desperate was the woman for the sake of her disturbed child, she remained undeterred. She came back at Jesus with a quick retort: "You're right, Lord, however, even begging dogs get scraps from the master's table." She didn't argue with Jesus and prove him wrong. She didn't think to challenge the offense in his reply. She simply believed in Jesus, and she believed that the gospel – the good news - was even for her and her daughter, and that they would get the help they needed. Her persistence and her faith caused Jesus to expand his thinking and be open to a solution to the problem at hand that wasn't an either/or but rather a both/and. With surprise and joy, Jesus marveled at her great faith and he responded in kind by saying, "Let it be done as you wish," and her daughter was healed instantly.

That's the story as Matthew tells it. We can't easily wrap our minds around this interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. Perhaps he was tired, worn out, nerves on end, and short-tempered. If so, we can relate to this Jesus because he is just as human as we are! Others have suggested that Jesus was testing her by toying with her to see what she was made of and how she would respond. Or, it has been suggested that Matthew included this story in his gospel in order to instruct those early Christians, who were struggling with all the different people that were coming in faith to Jesus. At first, the Christian movement was an entirely Jewish experience, but it quickly became a cosmopolitan, multi-racial reality. Thus, in telling this story, Matthew was intentionally guiding the church to be more accepting of others.

Here's another possibility that is suggested by this very text. It is plausible that this is a turning point in Jesus' own understanding of himself, his ministry, and his role as the Messiah.

It may very well be the case that, due to the Canaanite woman's persistence and strong faith in him, Jesus began to see things in a new light. While his main focus was on the lost sheep of the house of Israel, perhaps it also began to dawn on Jesus (as well as Matthew's community) that true love has no boundaries and the good news is intended for all. Isn't it conceivable that the woman's convincing argument led Jesus to broaden his scope, and that Jesus was turned inside out from focusing solely on his own kind to consider reaching across nationalistic and religious borders to embrace all people?

This may have been a learning experience, a teachable moment, for Jesus. It wouldn't be the first time for Luke tells us that, after his frantic parents finally found their twelve-year-old "lost" son in the temple, "Jesus increased in wisdom." In other words, Jesus wasn't a finished and perfect product at birth. He lived and learned and grew just as we do. Today's gospel lesson gives us a glimpse into one of those "Aha" moments when Jesus understood more clearly the will of God and the work he was called to do.

Evidently, the lesson took hold for Jesus (and Matthew as well) for at the conclusion of this Gospel, the risen Christ instructs his disciples to "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." No one is left outside of God's gracious reach. We also see this spelled out on the cross; in love with the whole world, Jesus gave away his life to save all people, Jews and Canaanites, pilgrims and pagans. On the cross, the Lord Jesus stretched out his arms to embrace peoples of every nation on earth.

Someone has said that the big miracle in this story is not the healing of the woman's child, but the healing of two people's souls from the deep wounds of racial prejudice. Jesus was a product of his time and so are we. Our mission is his mission: to root out any kind of prejudice in our own lives as well as in the life of the church. The tendency to fear and hate the stranger, the "other," is in all of us. Jesus calls us to follow in his footsteps. We are to be open to the Spirit, who will empower us to grow and change, who will turn us inside out so that we are no longer preoccupied with just our own kind and prejudiced toward all others. God's love will move us beyond the boundaries we create in order to accept and embrace all people whom God has created in God's own image – just like you and me!

This text challenges us to face up to the others "out there" and to move toward them and build community together so that we can be sisters and brothers in the Lord. In the Old Testament lesson from Genesis 45, Joseph would have been justified in disowning his brothers for what they had done to him many years ago. Instead, he took the high road of forgiveness and mercy. He revealed himself to them as their long lost brother, saying, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life." Joseph forgave them because he saw the big picture of how God worked through their evil to bring about good for many in the time of famine. We too are called to love, forgive, and be merciful to the outsider and our enemies because that's precisely how God has related to us in Jesus Christ.

Given that this year marks the 150th anniversary of the Civil War here in our country, the following story seems to be very appropriate. After General Lee surrendered his remaining

25,000 Confederate troops to General Grant, thus ending the Civil War, two days later, President Lincoln gave a public address. The immense crowd in front of the White house hoped to hear a triumphant “victory speech.” But the President had no inclination to do so. Instead, he proceeded to explain the practicability of Reconstruction with Amnesty. The speech was not what the people wanted hear, and it ended as an apparent failure. When someone in the crowd yelled, “What are you going to do with the rebel leaders?” the crowd set up a chant: “Hang them! Hang them! Hang them! Hang them!” Rebuked by the crowd, the president stood there forlorn, defeated. But President Lincoln’s young son, Tad, aged eleven, tugged on his father’s sleeve and cried: “No, Papa! Don’t hang them. Hang onto them!” Quickly raising his hands to quiet the crowd, the president declared emphatically: “There! Tad’s got it. Don’t hang them. Hang onto them.” And the crowd, many of which had hoped to hear vengeance declared, slowly drifted away.

That same quality of mercy was voiced more eloquently just a month before in the closing paragraph of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, delivered on March 4, 1865: “With malice toward none: with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right; let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphans; to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”

I couldn’t have said it better myself! Let us live out the gospel of Jesus Christ in our own lives and may the Holy Spirit turn us inside out – for the sake of all others and to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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