

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Aug 17th 2014

In recent weeks, we have heard of Jesus' many miracles - healing men, women and children of various maladies. So today's gospel is quite startling, presenting a side of Jesus we have not seen. Jesus withdraws to the region of Tyre and Sidon – perhaps due to fatigue and weariness from the press of the crowds. And even there he is known; a woman calls out to him, using his title, “Lord, Son of David.” But “Jesus did not say a word in answer to her”. I imagine that may have raised a few eye brows among the disciples. Clearly this is a woman of faith, why would Jesus not speak to her? Is he that tired? Is this a demon he cannot exorcise from her daughter? When his disciples plead with him to send her away, since she keeps calling, Jesus says “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Those within hearing distance must have been puzzled, hearing this for the first time. Is he not moved by the same compassion he had for others? But the woman persists, kneels before Jesus, and continues to plead on behalf of her daughter. Now comes the real shocker; Jesus tells her, “It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.” Silence descends upon the crowd. This is a crude analogy and offensive in any time or place. And yet the woman persists – “Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters.” It is then that Jesus acknowledges her faith, and her daughter is healed.

This story is unusual; it begs the question, why did Matthew include this event, when it presents Jesus in such a harsh and cruel light? Why did Jesus not want to heal this woman's daughter – due to fatigue? Or because she was not of the house of Israel? In any case, his exhaustion doesn't explain his uncharacteristic rudeness. Perhaps Matthew wanted to portray not only Jesus' divinity and his power to heal, but also his humanity – Jesus experienced the same fatigue and its effects as all humans do; he experienced the same impatience and desire to get away from the demands of others; he occasionally was harsh with others; and, at some point, came to learn through the pleas of others that his ministry and mission were for all peoples, for all time. He had to grow in knowledge and wisdom of this truth.

Had this been me beseeching Jesus, I doubt that I would have persisted after being ignored by him. I certainly would have been long gone after the first rebuke. What or who could I possibly love so much that I would be willing to be ignored, then refused, and then insulted in front of this crowd? Her boldness inspires me to ask: What or whom do I care about so passionately that I will not give up my pleas to God, despite feeling like I am being ignored or that God has no interest in my prayer.

What have we stopped speaking to God about? What desires, seemingly ignored or refused, have we stopped praying? Maybe the question is not, as we hear so often, “Why doesn't God answer my prayers?” But rather, what happens to us when we stop seeking, pleading and praying? Perhaps our hearts shrink little by little, our capacity for mystery and compassion diminished.

Today's first and second readings set us up for the drama that unfolds in the gospel, and now hold more meaning for me after praying with the gospel. God's love and mercy are universal - Inclusive, all-encompassing, complete – for all peoples of all time.

The Isaiah passage describes a God who longs to be in relationship with ALL peoples; one who desires that “my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples”; it doesn't matter whether they are “locals” or “foreigners.” God's justice and salvation are generously promised and given to all who sincerely seek the Lord.

Likewise, in the second reading, Paul's passionate plea surfaces despite the convoluted statements:

God's mercy is intended for all, whether Jew or Gentile.

Let us be as bold as the Canaanite woman to believe it and to act on it – seeking God's mercy, love and healing.

Diane Jorgensen - Creighton University Student