

A Godly Life Is Not About Being Perfect

August 20, 2023
Matthew 15:21-28

Prayer: God of ancient story and present moment may the words I offer in reflection, be acceptable to you and echo your wisdom in our time. Amen

Desperation. Desperate for healing. Desperate for freedom. Desperate for the means to keep body and soul together. Here in our Gospel lesson we have the story of a woman who is desperate. A woman seeking help for her sick child. In her desperation she looks to Jesus. Jesus has created some buzz, he is in her neighbourhood, she has heard about Jesus and she intends to get his help for her sick daughter.

All of us, at some time or other know will know what it is to be desperate in small ways and large. Times of desperation are built in to living it seems – moments of utter powerlessness - that deeply painful complete inability to resolve whatever it is that is tearing us apart. And when it happens, we turn to God, we stretch out our hands for support. We cry out for help. It's not hard, for us to identify with the suffering of this mother. Helpless to heal her child she turns to the controversial healer she has heard about as her last resort. She has heard he cures people, that he eats with tax collectors, surely Jesus will help.

But, wait a minute. Jesus refuses to help. That can't be right – but there it is right there in the Gospel according to Matthew. Jesus refuses. He completely ignores her appeal for healing. He dismisses her. As do Jesus' disciples. In fact, they demand Jesus send the woman away. And Jesus agrees with them; saying. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

So here we have it. Jesus, our Jesus, is refusing to help this woman and her daughter because they are foreign. They are not citizens of the house of Israel. They are Canaanite, invisible, unimportant. Outsiders. A minority. Thus, this woman and her daughter are not to be the subject of his compassion and mercy. Jesus shuts her down. But the woman refuses to be sent away. Desperate and determined, she kneels before him, "Lord, help me.". Still Jesus refuses her. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." In other words: it is not fair to take what is intended for my people and give it to those who are not my people – who are foreigner, who are enemy. Harsh, harsh words. But the woman is desperate and in that desperation speaks these words of truth. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Jesus is stopped in his tracks, her words cut through to his heart. Finally, his eyes are opened. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." The daughter is healed.

This is an uncomfortable story. If Jesus treats this desperate woman like this, what about us? What about us, when we are desperate? Why on earth did Matthew think to put this story in his gospel? It is the only place in scripture which puts Jesus in a bad light, the only place where Jesus is bested in an argument. So why is it here? Why has Matthew included this in his gospel?

In all of Scripture, Jesus is described as an example of a godly life and we are invited to follow in his footsteps. But Jesus doesn't seem very godly in this story. Where is his famous compassion? Where is his mercy?

I think the gospel writer Matthew is reminding Jesus followers that Jesus, lived a human life with the same problems and joys shared by all human beings. He was not excused from temptation, hunger, or hurt. He lived it all. He followed his God. He kept his eyes on his ministry of radical compassion and justice – But he didn't always get it right. We know he wavered the night before his crucifixion when he trembled in fear at what was to come. And Jesus seemed to stumble here as well with the Canaanite woman.

Jesus had come to establish the realm of God's mercy and justice. And he would do everything required of him to make that happen. But then this foreign woman turns up to muddy the water. Who was she anyway? For Jesus she was a foreigner who worshipped a different God. A pagan woman. Why should he be responsible to her? He had enough to worry about with his own people. There was no time or room for her in his vision for Israel. He had more important, more urgent things to do. He tells her so, in plain words. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." You are not my problem.

But she speaks her truth and pushes Jesus to look again. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." And Jesus truly sees her for the first time. He hears her protest. His heart is opened, and he knows compassion. It is the right thing to do. God is not to be limited by citizenship, race, ethnicity, religion, orientation, or status. The Canaanite woman pushed for that. And Jesus came to understand it too. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." The daughter is healed.

Jesus is setting before us the example of a godly life. A godly life is not about being perfect, about being right all the time. A godly life is a life lived in the light of the love of God. A godly life will stumble and fall. We are

human after all. But the important thing is not our stumbling but our willingness to get up and try again. To be prepared to see with fresh eyes at any moment. A godly life can only be lived through the eyes of the heart. Matthew included this story to make this clear.

Many years ago Rev Sue Eaves, an Episcopal priest from England was travelling with a group of very conservative business men. Eaves writes: "We were on our way to meet with Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian President, on the Gaza strip. Our leader had to remind everyone to be polite, no matter their personal opinion of this controversial leader, considered a terrorist by many. We were ushered into a room at his headquarters where he appeared a few minutes later. The atmosphere was tense. He told us of the poverty and sufferings of his people. He talked of their hunger and helplessness. The hearts of the businessmen began to soften. Instead of judgement, they began to ask what they could do, expecting demands of their considerable wealth. To their surprise Arafat made a simple request. He asked them to advocate for the passing of America's budget for that year. It had been delayed by political bickering. In it, President Arafat explained, alongside the billions for Israel, was a small amount for the Palestinians. About 1/30th of what America was providing for Israel. They needed it so badly, he said. Would they help? Would they appeal to the American politicians for action? Yes, they said, yes, they most certainly would. And, as we left, each man present embraced the one they had considered their enemy. Yes, indeed they would help. They would go home. They would speak out for justice".

Jesus expects us to do the same, to gaze upon the world with our hearts, and to recognize we can sometimes be wrong.

We are to own that we can be too narrow, too opinionated, too fixed in our views, too eager to believe we are right.

Our lesson today invites us to consider who we have ignored, sent away, dismissed. Who have we looked at as other – not my people?

To follow the "Jesus way" - to love God, love our neighbor, and to love our selves, no matter what it takes, is to accept his challenge to pursue the truth, and to be open to new insights and possibilities. In doing so we will walk with humility and an honest strength, with grace and deep tenderness. We will walk "Jesus way"

Let this be our way today and everyday. Amen

Scripture: Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” ²³But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” ²⁴He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.