

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
Sermon - August 16, 2020
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In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. +

Reading the story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew always reminds me of a Vespers homily I gave many, years ago. I tried to put myself in the place of the Canaanite woman. Her child was a girl—certainly not as valued as a son was in those days. Had she gone to her peoples' gods—Eshmun and Shadrafa, the gods of healing? What about her husband—was he a pagan? what did he think? And because of her comment about dogs, I wondered whether she had pets, little dogs that would scamper around her feet while she was cooking.

But when I began to meditate on the reading for today, I saw something else. Today, confronted as we are with so many changes, with the need to reconsider our way of life, I see something really radical.

What stands out to me not just in this passage but in many others is that Jesus is breaking laws, breaking traditions, going against social expectations. And he is asking us to do the same.

We've all grown up with rules, with laws. Every family has them—how you behave at dinner, what time curfew is, who washes the dishes. When I was a little girl, living in New York City, my mother was very firm about some things. “Look both ways when crossing the street” was one rule—even if it was a one-way street. “Lock your door at night” was another. Here in Valdosta, I have a friend who never used to lock her doors—and that sends shivers down my spine! “Have eyes in the back of your head,” my mother used to say—in other words, be vigilant. It's much-needed.

And then, when we grow up, there are social expectations galore, many of which we learn about—sometimes unfortunately—by experience. At work there are business protocols: how to dress, how to behave at a meeting, whom to ask to lunch. There are standards to follow, forms to fill out—you name it. It's the same in the academic world, it's the same no matter where you go, except that the rules vary from country to country. If you've traveled at all, you know that it is different greeting someone in New York from someone in, say, Louisiana. You say “hello” differently in Japan, in Norway, in Argentina, and it isn't just the verbal language, it's whether you shake hands or bow or hug.

And all of that is quite aside from formal laws and protocol.

So . . . to go back to our reading. Here we have an account of a woman who breaks all sorts of rules, and it's embedded in the account of a Savior who does the same. What's going on?

First of all, this woman is a Canaanite. She comes from a tribe descended from Canaan, whom Noah cursed in Genesis. She comes from a polytheistic nation, one that worshipped many gods. And it is Canaan, remember, that is the Land promised to the Jewish people.

Secondly, she's a woman. And she is out by herself--no husband, no brother, no chaperone. Moreover, she is asking help for an insignificant girl, her daughter, who faces the same social, religious, and political stigma that she does.

Despite all that, look at how she addresses Jesus—as “Lord.” It's a title that would not be tolerated by her Canaanite compatriots.

So let's pause for a moment. Why on earth is she risking her marriage, her reputation, her very life?

I think the answer is radically simple.

Love. Love for a small, insignificant unknown person who isn't old enough to contribute in any way to the community. Love for her daughter causes her to risk everything.

After all, the disciples wanted Jesus to send her away. I can't help but wonder whether they prodded her with their walking sticks and said some words to her themselves.

And Jesus? What does he do?

First of all, he's silent. As if he's thinking. As if he's torn. And then he replies, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But I simply can't imagine that he drew himself up, tossed back his head, and said that proudly. Rather, it's as if he's saying to himself, "Here is someone who desperately needs help. And yes, she's a Gentile, she's not a Hebrew. But perhaps there's another kind of lost sheep . . ."

And then, this outcast, this woman, falls to her knees, begging for help, calling him "Lord," which many people refused to do. Calling him "Lord" as if she recognizes who he is.

Again, he responds, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Children? Yes. The children of Israel.

Then, the courage that possessed Deborah, the cleverness that possessed Rahab, arose in this nameless woman of no education. Thinking of her own home, she says, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs under the table."

And Jesus heals her daughter.

He breaks the law. He breaks the rules. He redefines who the "lost sheep" are, who the children are. And a beloved daughter is healed.

If that nameless Canaanite woman had followed social standards, if she had behaved the way her community expected her to, she would not have sought out Jesus. She would not have put herself at risk of being laughed at, ostracized, possibly even sacrificed to one of the gods. Instead, she follows a new rule, and it's one that saves not only her daughter but herself. It is a rule that applies to all of us.

For Jesus, for her, it is love that conquers, love that gives courage. It is the one age-old rule that surpasses every other rule in the book. "Love the Lord God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself."

This isn't an easy lesson, much harder than looking both ways before crossing the street. We're being asked to put the wellbeing of others above ourselves, above everything else. We're being asked to reach out to others out of love, no matter who they are.

Both Jesus and the woman followed their hearts, and their hearts told them that their own status, their own social standing, their own lives were of less importance than those of others. What they needed to do was to act out of love for the "lost sheep," act in such a way that others knew they were loved.

If we too follow our hearts in the same way, it will transform every single minute of our lives.

In His Holy Name.