

Speaking Unity
20th Sunday of Ordinary Time
August 16, 2020
Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

Isaiah 56:1,6-8
Matthew 15:21-28

Sung: Kyrie Eleison

When we sing the ancient Greek words – *Kyrie Eleison*, “Lord, have mercy upon us,” we echo the Canaanite woman from Matthew’s gospel. *Kyrie Eleeo! Kyrie Eleeo!* she cries, “Lord, have mercy on me! My daughter is possessed. Lord, have mercy on me.” She has recognized Jesus as a healer, even though he’s far from home, wandering through the Roman province of Syria, near to the great Phoenician-Greek cities of Tyre and Sidon. This woman, whom Matthew describes as a Canaanite, is probably a follower of the “old religion” – a polytheist, a part of the religious and ethnic group that the Israelites displaced from the land.¹ She’s one of the last people you’d expect to be calling out to Jesus for help.

And yeah, the disciples feel the same way. Seeing that Jesus ignores her shouting, these followers of Jesus start calling out, *apoluo*, “set her loose.” Now, we’ve competing shouts – *Kyrie Eleeo! Apoluo!* – Lord have mercy, Set her loose.² (If you start hearing part of the *Bohemian Rhapsody*, you’re in good company with me.) Into this literal Greek chorus are notes that stand out: the Canaanite woman refers to Jesus as “Son of David” and the disciples say, “her shouting is bothering us.” At this point in Matthew’s gospel, none of the disciples have proclaimed Jesus Messiah – that conversation lays in the future. But here is a Canaanite woman, familiar enough with the Jewish people to proclaim Jesus a “son of David.” Could this be a reference to wise Solomon, who married Canaanite women as a concession of sorts?

¹ Admittedly, Matthew’s use of this term is odd. Mark’s description of a “syro-phenician” woman would fit the region, but Matthew seems intent to emphasize her difference from Jesus’ disciples even further.

² This chorus idea inspired by James Boyce’s commentary:
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=980

An acknowledgement of a shared history, even if that history was fraught with warfare, violence and trickery? Or is this Canaanite woman aware of the way that “Son of David” could refer to a messianic figure, in particular to this Jesus of Nazareth, wandering preacher of Good News and healer of the sick and possessed? Any of these options are intriguing, and lead to wanting to know more about this woman.

This woman – this poor woman – is not named in either of the Gospels that tell her story. A third-century preacher, Clementine, names her Justa and her daughter Bernice – and out of respect for using someone’s name, I’m going to use this as we go forward. Granted, since it’s a Latin name, it’s very unlikely to be what she was actually called – but it still feels better to use a name than to keep speaking of her as “that Canaanite woman.”

At long last, Jesus, this miracle healer from Galilee, acknowledges Justa. Or at least, acknowledges the situation. Unlike in Mark’s gospel, Jesus doesn’t speak to her at first – instead, he seems to be addressing the disciples, or the thin air. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” This is a devastating comment, coming from the one we know as loving and kind. How is this loving and kind? It’s dismissive, and treats Justa like a Medieval noble treats a serf – beneath even the dignity of acknowledging their personhood.

But Jesus has stopped moving, at least, and so Justa is able to come and kneel in front of him. By doing so, she stops him going further, but also shows genuine respect for him. Indeed, the Greek for kneeling before someone is *proskuneo* – and it’s the same word that is also used for worshiping throughout the New Testament!³ Once again, she calls to him, seeking recognition: “Lord, help me.”

And Jesus responds to her request, though again appears to be speaking to the air rather than to Justa directly. “It is not good to take the food meant for the children and throw it to the puppies.” Really, Jesus? Non-acknowledgement, then insults? Why are you even in this region, if you’re just going to insult the people

³ So Much Bible note JJJ - <https://somuchbible.com/word-studies/annotated-scripture/matthew-1510-28/#notes-45>

who come to you in good faith?

But, following the grand tradition of folks in the Bible who use clever remarks to show their point, Justa calls Jesus on this sanctimonious statement while turning the insult to her advantage. “Yes, Lord,” she says, “But puppies get to eat the crumbs falling from the table.” And Jesus acknowledges this turn, saying, “Lady, you have great faith! It will be done as you wish.”

This is the only time in the entire gospel of Matthew that Jesus calls the faith of someone “great.” It comes after a very contentious conversation – and then, Jesus returns to Galilee, and continues his ministry there. What are we even to do with this story?

Well, for one thing, it shows that listening to others, and being willing to change our minds is not a fallibility of the human condition – but is something that even Jesus did. When we think of Jesus, we often think of “Perfect Jesus” – already fully divine. John’s gospel certainly paints Jesus this way, always speaking with I AM statements and the like. But Mark and Matthew portray a human Jesus, still discovering what God’s good news means for the world. Fully human means able to change – and that if Jesus can listen to another viewpoint, we ought to be able to, too. So much of our world today is closed off from one another – literally, as we try to contain this pandemic – that it’s easy to form our own little bubble of information, too. We need to be open to listen to others, not listening to try to change THEIR minds, but listening to where God is leading us.

In this story, we are like the disciples, following Jesus, but saying, “Let that other viewpoint go!” In this story, we are like Jesus, listening and changing, recognizing God’s presence in people whom we think are so different from us that God can’t possibly be with them, too. And in this story, perhaps most of all, we are like the Canaanite woman, asking for mercy, for healing, for assistance in the very real and difficult situation we find ourselves in.

The Prophet Isaiah, after all, told of a time when people who were not of Jewish origin would worship God: “I will bless the foreigners who worship the Lord... I will fill them with joy at my house of prayer, because my Temple will be

called a house of prayer for all nations.” “Foreigners” is a gentle translation – the Hebrew means “children of misfortune or disaster.” Right now, we may be feeling especially like “children of misfortune” – but God calls us to worship with joy, at the house of prayer for all people. God speaks unity into disillusionment, and as Jesus has shown us, even in great disagreement, we can find unity. Great faith, it seems, requires patience, persistence, and occasionally, persuasion.

If we go back to the question we had before: Why even did Jesus go to this place? – perhaps we can have an answer. In speaking with Justa, in healing Bernice, Jesus gives hope to all of us who are gentiles and children of misfortune. We are worthy of gathering at the table with God – not from our own doing, but from God’s mercy and grace. Sometimes, even at our most frustrated, at the limits of what we think we can handle – that’s when God speaks unity. “Push out the table a bit wider. Add a new leaf. For not only are there crumbs available – there is a feast at the table.”

May you have patience as you wait on word from God for the important healing in your life. May you be persistent in asking Jesus for what you need – and may the Holy Spirit grant you the persuasion you need to change your heart and the hearts of others. Amen.