

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 17, 2014
Mary Hinkle
Crumbs From the Table

56:1, 6-8; Psalm 67; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

My next-door neighbor and friend of 16 years died last month, and I went to her funeral. It was at a local Roman Catholic parish, so I knew I'd be unable to take part in the Eucharist. Thinking I had prepared for that, I found myself surprised by the strength of my reaction when the celebrating priest said, "Those who are not baptized Catholics, STAY IN YOUR SEATS and pray to become closer to God." I felt as if a door had been slammed in my face, and I was really angry at being excluded, left on the outside. I felt completely cut off—so much so that I got no spiritual benefit at all from the remainder of the service.

Now, my reaction to that episode of exclusion is entirely my own responsibility, of course, and there ARE more productive responses to such situations. Years and years ago, I knew a woman—very active in her Methodist church—who was preparing for the wedding of one of her sons to a Roman Catholic woman. The families met over a meal to discuss the wedding plans, and the mother of the bride at one point looked at the mother of the groom and said, "You know that you can't take Communion in my church." The mother of the groom smiled sweetly and said very calmly, "But you're welcome to take Communion in mine."

Her response strikes me as much closer to the reaction to prejudice that we see in today's Gospel lesson. The Canaanite woman is probably angry—I certainly would be, in her shoes. But she responds with wit and self-deprecation to Jesus' insulting words, and she gets what she wants. We don't know what it cost her to accept the epithet of "dogs" for herself and her people. Maybe she had a twisted sense of humor. Maybe she was so accustomed to slurs that they had lost their sting. Maybe she was desperate enough to bear any insult, any amount of abuse. In any case, it must have been worth the cost to obtain healing for her daughter.

But what about that slur from Jesus? What's up with this story? I have a hard time with this passage, because this is not the Jesus I'm used to. This is not the Jesus I want to emulate. This isn't even a Jesus I like very much. How can we reconcile our loving Savior with this cutting insult to a woman in need and in pain?

I thought about what I might have done had I been magically transported back to that day and been part of the crowd, with all my modern sensibilities intact. I think I'd have felt embarrassed by his initial treatment of this woman. I might have thought, "How can he be so cruel, so prejudiced?" And then I thought about the times that my biases have come out. I've never called any person a dog, but I've certainly had less-than-charitable thoughts about a person or a group. I've made some pretty harsh remarks inside my head, or even aloud inside my car. Usually when I'm having a bad day and my self-control is getting frayed.

So is that the explanation? Was Jesus just having a really bad day? He was fully human, after all, so maybe he was exhausted and grumpy and out of patience. This idea felt a little sacrilegious to me, so I was relieved to find that noted preacher and author Barbara Brown Taylor made exactly this point in a sermon she wrote on this passage. Her sermon reminded me of all the things Jesus has gone through in the days leading up to this episode. He has heard that his cousin John the Baptist has been murdered. He has just come from his hometown, where his family and neighbors have rejected his teaching and himself. He has just seen Peter, his loyal disciple, almost drown for lack of faith in him. He has tried to escape the crowds for some peace and prayer, but they keep following him, wanting things from him. And now his disciples, instead of handling this annoying, untouchable, Gentile woman, come whining to him to get rid of her. Must he do everything himself? And when he tells her that he's there to save only his own people, she still won't give up and go away. She's getting on his VERY LAST NERVE! And so he snaps, and flings an ethnic slur at her. And she comes back with wit and humor and humility, and her faith in him—her recognition of him as

Messiah, a recognition his closest followers still haven't made—brings him to a pivotal moment in his ministry.

I think something very important happens to Jesus at this moment, this split second, that the story doesn't explain. We see the outcome—we see Jesus tell the Canaanite woman that her faith is so great that her wish has been fulfilled—but we aren't told what goes on inside Jesus in that moment to make him change his stance. So let's make time stand still for a moment and speculate about what is going on.

Have you had the experience of knowing something intellectually, knowing it up here, but not KNOWING it in here? I think this is what Jesus experiences here. We have seen his deep knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures; when he paid that visit to his hometown synagogue, he read and interpreted scripture to the congregation. In Luke's version of that story, Jesus reads and explicates a passage from Isaiah. So surely we can assume that he knows the prophet's words we heard today:

“And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain....For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples...I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.”

He knows—up here—that the Kingdom is for all people, not just the lost sheep of Israel. In fact, according to Luke, it's precisely because Jesus makes this point in his hometown synagogue that the people drive him out in anger. Maybe part of his reaction to the Canaanite woman arises from a “here-we-go-again” feeling because he's just been attacked for daring to remind his neighbors that all who have faith in God are part of the Kingdom.

I think Jesus is having an “aha moment.” He suddenly KNOWS this passage in his heart, in every fiber of his being, not just in his head. He suddenly has a new understanding of his ministry. He was wrong; he was not sent only for the lost sheep of Israel. He was sent for all the

nations, for all the peoples, as the Psalmist tells us. He was sent for everyone, including this woman kneeling at his feet.

Jesus already had offended some people with his tolerance, his willingness to dine with sinners and touch people with nasty diseases, his practice of forgiving rather than punishing, his dismissal of all the man-made laws designed to shut people out. And now his embrace becomes even wider, taking in foreigners, outsiders, those who are not among God's chosen people. He is here to bring God's kingdom to anyone who will hear his message and believe it, to everyone whose faith is strong enough and large enough and deep enough.

THIS is the Jesus I want to imitate, the Jesus we all should imitate. But do I? Do we? I look at events in the world in the past few weeks, and I feel deeply saddened, because the human race comes nowhere near meeting Jesus' standard of love. Even if we tally only religious and ethnic conflict, we get a sickening list:

- Almost 300 people die when a passenger plane is shot down in an ethnic conflict in Ukraine.
- Israelis and Palestinians attack and counterattack in the latest upwelling of violence in their centuries-old conflict.
- Minority Uighers use terrorist tactics to battle majority Han Chinese, trying to keep their culture and language and living from being wiped out.
- In Burma, Buddhists, led by monks, attack ethnic minority Muslims with the goal of driving them out of the country.
- And in Missouri, racial tension explodes in marches and looting and militarized police forces facing peaceful protesters after a young, unarmed African-American man is shot and killed by a police officer.

I said at the beginning of this sermon that my reaction to prejudice at my friend's funeral was my responsibility; my actions and behavior are the only things I can control. In imitation of Christ, what can I do in the face of this litany of prejudice and hatred? I can pray: for peace in the world, for the lives of those on both sides of every conflict, for those who see

themselves as my enemies, for the grace to recognize and overcome my own prejudices. I can strive to treat everyone with respect and dignity, especially those who don't share my views and values. I can discern the difference between condemning others' behavior and judging the value of their lives. I can remember to look for Christ in each person. I can try to KNOW in my heart and my soul—not just in my head—that God's Kingdom is for all people.

And we, Holy Cross, this community, can do the same. Our established reputation as a warm and welcoming parish does not exempt us from re-examining ourselves, from striving to come closer to Jesus' model. When we say that all are welcome at God's table, THIS table, let's be sure we really mean it. We must do more than offer only crumbs from our table; we must invite all to share the feast. Amen.