

Sermon for Proper 15A
Sunday, August 20, 2023
“Testing our faith”

Text: Matthew 15:10-28

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today’s gospel gives us two very powerful scenes in the ministry of Jesus. The first is his discourse about things that defile a person, and the other is the encounter between Jesus and the Syrophenician, or Canaanite, Woman. I don’t want to ignore Jesus’s words of wisdom about what defiles a person, but this morning, I’d like to focus your attention on the encounter between Jesus and a woman seeking his help.

Jesus had been traveling throughout the region of Galilee teaching and preaching and having to defend himself and his disciples from some very critical scribes and Pharisees who had been following him around and antagonizing him at every turn. The beginning of today’s gospel passage says that left *that* place where he was and went northward toward the coast of the Mediterranean Sea to the district of Tyre and Sidon. In ancient history, this region was known as Phoenicia and was famous for producing expensive purple dyes and developing a system of writing that is the ancestor of the Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and our own alphabet as we know it. There, he met a Syrophenician woman, which meant she had ancestral origins from what was known as Syria then and the Phoenician lands on the coast. And she was a Canaanite; these were the people whom the Israelites displaced centuries before when they left the land of Egypt.

This led to some key dynamics in the relationship between this woman and Jesus that are worth mentioning. At the time when Jesus lived, Jews would have nothing to do with Canaanites. After the Exodus when the Israelites fled captivity and slavery in Egypt by crossing the Red Sea, they eventually ended up in the land of Canaan, which was to be the promised land. Israelites did not associate with Canaanites, because they worshipped other gods, like Baal, and God told them to take their land and settle there. Centuries later, the Jews still did not mingle with Canaanites because they were considered foreigners. But, ironically, three of the women who were identified as ancestors of Jesus at the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel—Rahab, Tamar, and Ruth—were Canaanite women. So this woman who sought Jesus’s assistance to heal her daughter might have been a distant relative of Jesus. And, in identifying Jesus as the Son of David, she identified a common ancestral heritage between herself and Jesus. The other dynamic that may be at play here is a cultural one: it was common practice among most peoples in the region to allow their animals to be present at the table while they were eating; Jews, however, did not do that. Jesus had already been struggling with antagonistic scribes and Pharisees who felt that Jesus wasn’t adhering to the norms and expectations of his culture and religion, and the way Matthew set up the telling of these stories, his Jewish audience would have understood these references.

So there was Jesus, traveling throughout a foreign region, when he encountered a woman who sought his help to exorcize a demon from her daughter. Jesus's response often bothers us, because he seems to dismiss this woman. First, he acted as though he didn't hear her and then his disciples told him to tell her to go away. Ignoring foreigners was not an uncommon practice for devout practicing Jews at this time, but this does seem like an unusual response for Jesus, whom we always see coming to the defense of people who were being ignored and marginalized by most other people. And I have often heard comments, discussions, and sermons at this point speak about the possibility of Jesus changing his mind or realizing a moment of the expansion of his ministry. And perhaps this was going on, but I'd like us to consider a different possibility: a possibility that Jesus responded the way he did in order to push her toward stronger resolve and deeper faith—to guide her toward strength within herself that she didn't even know she had. When Jesus seems to insult her by saying that it isn't fair to take food meant for the children and throw it to the dogs, she comes right back and says, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." (We find a reference to her response in our Prayer of Humble Access that we pray just before receiving communion: "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under thy table.") Jesus tested her resolve and her faith, she mustered up her inner resolve, and ultimately Jesus recognized how much faith she had that he could heal her daughter simply by saying that it may be so, and it was so. Her daughter was healed instantly.

In our own lives, God may put before us what seems like a "no" to our prayers in order to push us further in our resolve and in our faith. To get us out of our comfort zone. To get us to muster up a level of faith and strength that we didn't think we had. I think of two incidents from my own past when I was told "no" but my persistence led to a "yes." When I was in high school, I wanted to participate in a student exchange program and travel a foreign country. I applied and was turned down, because they felt I was too young. I was fifteen that year, and I probably was. Anyone with kids knows what a huge difference a year can make in a youngster's maturity level. But I was determined to do this, and I didn't stop trying, and the following year—when I was sixteen—I spent the summer as a foreign exchange student in Switzerland. I'm still in contact with my host family to this day.

The other situation that comes to mind was when I was going through the discernment process for becoming a priest. The first time I went before the commission on ministry and the bishop, I was turned down. (It wasn't here in Long Island, in case you were wondering!) The bishop said he wasn't convinced that I was ready to give up a perfectly good career in medicine to become a priest. He even suggested that I consider the vocational diaconate. I went away very disappointed, but I mustered up my strength, realized that the bishop's "No" did not get rid of the persistent urge to answer God's call, talked to many others who saw in me a call to the priesthood, and a year later went back to the bishop. That time he validated my call, and here I am today.

God may lead you to what seems like a "No" in your own life, but this is not permission to give up, rather it is a way to test your resolve, to push you to stronger

faith, and allow you to think about where this takes you in your life. It may be God's way of slowing you down and saying, "What you're thinking isn't what I know is best for you right now, so take another look." But giving up isn't an option. When things don't go the way you expect, pray to God for the wisdom to move forward. It may mean that he wants you to find strength you didn't know you had, or it may be an opportunity to explore other possibilities. But we should never stop striving to be the best we can be, letting the words and actions that flow from us show the purity of our hearts and our faith that God can—and will—grant us what we ask, in accordance to his will. Amen.

Resources

Mitzi Smith, "Commentary on Matthew 15:10-28," in *The Working Preacher*,
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3360

Andrew Prior, <https://www.onemansweb.org/blind-privilege-and-the-kingdom-of-heaven-matthew-1510-28.html>