

REFLECTIONS FOR THE 20TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 20 August 2023

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

Inclusion, wisdom, and mercy are three themes beautifully threaded through the readings from the Liturgy of the Word on this 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time. These themes seem even more



precious in these days of stark realities: raging wildfires, overwhelmingly high temperatures across the globe (“an era of global boiling”), new variants of the COVID virus, unrelenting war between Ukraine and Russia, gang warfare in Haiti, steadily increasing food prices and fuel prices, increasing anti-racism in many countries, uneasy development of artificial intelligence, and so many more social and ecological challenges.

While the books of the Old Testament almost exclusively focus on the chosen people of Israel, parts of the book of Isaiah are an exception. In today’s reading from Isaiah 56 (written after the people return from the Babylonian exile), we hear these wonderfully inclusive words, “the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to the Lord, to love the name of the Lord, and to be my servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer” (Is 56:6-7). The passage ends with the definitive statement, “my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Is 56:7). How far we have come from this sense of openness and belonging in the house of God!

The summary document of the continental assemblies for the *Synod on Synodality* names those who are most excluded in God’s house today, those who do not feel that they belong: “the poorest, the lonely elderly, indigenous peoples, migrants without any affiliation and who lead a precarious existence, street children, alcoholics and drug addicts, those who have fallen into the plots of criminality and those for whom prostitution seems their only chance of survival, victims of trafficking, survivors of abuse (in the Church and beyond), prisoners, groups who suffer discrimination and violence because of race, ethnicity, gender, culture and sexuality” (#40). The document describes the response that we need to make, “Listening that becomes welcoming.”

It begins with listening and requires a broader and deeper conversion of attitudes and structures, as well as new approaches to pastoral accompaniment; it begins in a readiness to recognise that the peripheries can be the place where a call to conversion resounds along with the call to put the Gospel more decisively into practice. Listening requires that we recognize others as subjects of their own journey. When we do this, others feel welcomed, not judged, free to share their own spiritual journey. #32



When have you personally felt judged, not welcomed, or not free to share your own spiritual journey? Which groups do you see as most excluded from God’s house? Where are the peripheries in your world where the Gospel must be put “more decisively into practice”?

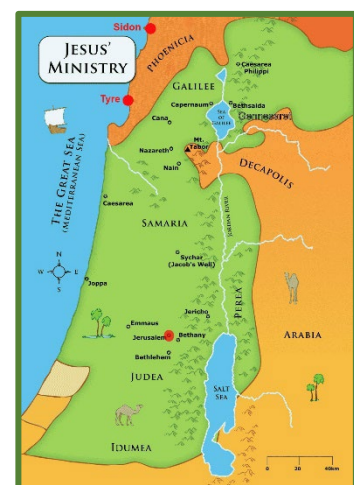


Psalm 67 reminds us that the excluded ones are not only humans. Three times in this very short psalm we are told that all Earth matters: “O God, that your way may be known upon earth” (Ps 67:2), “The earth has yielded its increase; God, our God, has blessed us” (Ps 67:6), and “let all the ends of the earth revere God” (Ps 67:7). Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’* with its seven goals has given world leadership in caring for our common home. The seven goals (pictured in the image) redefine and rebuild our relationship with each other and our common home. Their holistic approach acknowledges the planetary limits of all socio-economic systems and the human roots of the ecological crisis. They call for a spiritual and cultural revolution to realize integral ecology.

Paul’s letter to the Romans cautions us that the pathway to inclusion is not a simple or straightforward one. Paul believes that he is an Apostle to the Gentiles (Rom 11:13), challenged to do so when his own people refuse to accept Jesus as the Messiah. Paul does not accept that both Christianity and Judaism are roads to the living God. Paul does acknowledge that “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). Today, we interpret that to mean that all world religions are different paths to the same God, each one showing yet another face of the living God. Pope Francis has said, “Many think differently, feel differently, seeking God or meeting God in different ways. In this crowd, in this range of religions, there is only one certainty that we have for all: we are all children of God.”

The themes of all three readings come together in the short but profound story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman in Matthew’s Gospel. The story is told in chapter 15, the beginning of the second half of Matthew’s Gospel; it is the centerpiece of five episodes in that chapter. In the first half of the Gospel, Jesus is convinced that he has come to bring the good news solely to the “house of Israel.” In today’s encounter between the woman and Jesus, Jesus grows in wisdom and understanding of what God is calling him to do. Therefore, at the end of the second half of the Gospel, Jesus will say to the disciples gathered on the mountain in Galilee, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19).

Jesus and his disciples come to the district of Tyre and Sidon, north of Israel, on the Mediterranean coast in today’s Lebanon. This Gentile territory has strong trading ties with northern Israel. It seems that the encounter happened outside the two cities, on the boundary between the two countries. While Mark in his version of the story describes the woman as Syrophenician, a geographic description, Matthew calls her a Canaanite woman. Canaan is the ancient geographic name of the region that includes the Promised Land. The term was used in the history of that period when the Canaanites were considered the enemy of the people of Israel, not unexpected in that the people of Israel took the land from the people who lived there. It was no longer a term used in later centuries and certainly not in the time of Jesus. It is used here to emphasize that this woman is not a follower of the religion or the culture of the Jews; indeed, she would appear to be among the enemies of the Jews (even more so than the Samaritans). This makes her first words even more startling, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David” (Matt 15:22). She names Jesus as Lord and Son of David, titles that come from the rich Hebrew



tradition. She asks for “mercy,” that quality most associated with the God of the Hebrew Scriptures.

This woman is a mother whose daughter is tormented by demons. She believes that Jesus can heal her daughter and does not hesitate to fight for her daughter’s life. Jesus treats her terribly. He refuses to answer her plea (Matt 15:23). His disciples want Jesus to send her away, to stop her pestering them. Jesus seems to agree, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 15:25). The woman persists, kneeling before Jesus and begging him, “Lord, help me” (Matt 15:25). Jesus then deliberately insults the woman, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs” (Matt 15:26). The woman does not back down, but quickly and cleverly responds, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (Matt 15:27). Jesus responds, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish” (Matt 15:28).

Daughter of the Canaanite Woman, Peter Koenig



Joanna Dewey, the New Testament scholar, says, “The narrative portrays Jesus being bested by a woman and changing his behavior on that account. This is the only instance in the extant tradition of Jesus being taught by someone, and that someone is a woman who should not properly be speaking to him at all.” Three times, the woman has respectfully called Jesus, “Lord.” Finally, Jesus respectfully addresses her personally, “Woman.” And her daughter is healed instantly. The woman has won the debate, has achieved what she desperately needs – healing for her daughter. And Jesus is changed – he recognizes the wisdom and depths of the woman; he recognizes that he is called to bring the good news beyond the people of Israel. The Canaanite woman has more faith in Jesus than he has in himself. She has a more keen sense of God’s compassionate mercy toward those who cry out (a theme that runs from Exodus on), than Jesus has. Jesus now understands better what God has called him to do!

This woman and Jesus are both boundary walkers. Both dare to go to the peripheries of their own



***Canaanite Woman
Cerezo Barredo***

worlds, probably fearing that they will both be transformed by doing so. The woman is a Gentile, an outsider to Jesus and his disciples by nationality, culture, religion, and gender. Jesus is on land that is not his own; he has gone into the “enemy” territory. Jesus does not praise the woman’s courage but praises her “great faith.” His praise comes not only in words but in actions as he heals her daughter. Elaine Wainwright says so succinctly, “There is something radical in this: by rejecting the Galilean healer’s rejection of her, Justa [the name that the tradition gives the Canaanite woman] enables healing to happen.” By listening, Jesus changes from one who is convinced that he is right to one who knows that he must listen and become more aware of the scope of his vocation embedded in the irrevocable gifts and calling of God. In this story, we see the mirror of the words in the Synod document, “Listening that becomes welcoming.”

On a Lutheran website, Kindred, we find these words entitled “The Sacred Art of Talking Back to Jesus” which speak so powerfully to the wisdom in today’s story, “This is a sacred story about calling attention to but NOT about settling for the crumbs. When scripture talks about God’s goodness, it is a feast that never ends and a cup that overflows. This

is not a Gospel that asks us to shrink smaller or think less of ourselves but to expect more of God because it is who God has promised us they are. The Gospel is that we are not created simply to be tolerated but embraced, and not only embraced but celebrated.” The spiritual writer, Andrew King, reflects this same message in his prayer-poem, *A Place at the Table* (Matthew 15:21-28):

Do we wish to learn the meaning of God’s love among us?
Let us listen to the words of the Canaanite woman,
who knew she had a place at the table.

The clouds have paused their travelling to listen
to the song, the song of faith Christ hears her sing
in witness to the welcome of the table.

Send the letter to the cities, to the lonely
high-rise dwellers, to the stranger, to the poor.
Tell them they have places at the table.

Dial the telephones of the hurting, the ill and
the despairing; bring them in their neediness
to the healing in the welcome of the table.

The birds have sung their praises to the beauty
of the morning, of a new world beginning,
rejoicing in the bounty of the table.

The words are echoed in the blossoms,
in the sunrise, in the starlight: the words
that welcome us to our places at the table.

Do we yearn to see the face of God, to know
the nearness of the Beloved? We lift
the blindfold from our eyes at the table.

The majority of followers of the Gospel today are Gentile Christians not Jewish Christians. We are the Canaanite woman! Do we share her courage, her great faith, in this time of stark realities around us? Do we dare trust that God wants all of us and each of us to have more than the crumbs from the table? Do we dare to be boundary walkers who listen so that we will become people of welcome and hope? Do we dare to be boundary walkers, knowing that we will likely be transformed if we do so?



Canaanite Woman, Artist Unknown