

Year A, Proper 15
Matthew 15: 21-28
August 17, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

Sacred Moments:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

I love Jesus. I love the Jesus I meet in the Bible—the Jesus who tenderly raises a dead girl from her bed; the Jesus who feeds the multitudes; the Jesus who calls Lazarus back to life; the Jesus who sees as his mission bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, and letting the oppressed go free; the Jesus who is so deeply tied to God. A Jesus I want to follow.

But this Jesus, this Jesus we meet today, is hard for me to like or understand or follow. He brushes off the Canaanite woman—a woman in such deep need that she is willing to cross so many boundaries to ask Jesus to heal her tormented daughter. I find it hard to hear the arrogance in Jesus' response to her "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel." "How can he say that?" I find myself asking. What a brush off.

That brush off touches a chord in me. I remember the times I've been brushed off, overlooked, pushed aside, ignored. I remember the times I've felt so much an outsider—times when I've felt not smart enough, not pretty enough, not old enough, not young enough, not this or that enough; times when I've felt so far outside, so much alone. Times when I've slinked off to nurse my wounds. Times when I've vowed to myself, "I'll not be hurt like that again."

But that's not what the Canaanite woman does. She comes and kneels before Jesus—a position of submission, a position of servitude. She begs him, "Lord, help me" thus framing her plea in words he'll understand. His reply—a gratuitous insult. He says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Do you wince when you hear those words? I surely do. I'm not comfortable with this Jesus. I hear in him the arrogance of the insider, the contempt the powerful can have for the powerless. I'm reminded of the raised eyebrows, the knowing looks, the many ways folks have of saying "We're inside and you're outside." This Jesus makes me wince for he reminds me of the hurts I've felt, the rejections I've experienced.

And then I wonder—am I wincing at Jesus or am I wincing at myself? Am I wincing at the times I've played the part of insider? Am I wincing at the moments when I've brushed others off? At the ways I find to maintain my position, to keep my power? Priests have a way of doing that. Am I wincing at the memory of moments when I've turned a deaf ear to the voice of the outsider, the voice of the other? Challenges can be so hard to hear.

Perhaps that's part of the power of this story—its power to draw us to the moments when we, as individuals and as a community, have held tight to our comfort zone, our position,

our way of doing things; its power to call us to reflect on times when we've turned a deaf ear or a stony glaze to those who would challenge our understanding of the way things should be; its power to draw us right into the center of this conflict between Jesus and the Canaanite woman.

Thank God that Canaanite woman persists. She sticks with it. She doesn't let go. She doesn't slink off. She argues back. She says, "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." She takes up Jesus' own argument and refutes it. Imagine the courage that took! She was a woman, an outsider, a Canaanite to boot. And yet...and yet she stays in the conversation. She holds tight to her belief that God's mercy would prevail. She believes that Jesus will come around—that Jesus would live into his calling. In the process, she challenges and changes Jesus' understanding of his mission, Jesus' understanding of himself. No longer can he say, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel." No longer can he turn a deaf ear to those who fall outside his comfort zone. That Canaanite woman reminds him that he was sent to all in need of healing. What a gift she gives.

I think we all have Canaanite women in our lives—people we are prone to overlook, people who see things differently, people whose eyes are attuned to deep needs our eyes just don't see. I think we all need Canaanite women in our lives—people who challenge our understandings of who we are and what we are called to do; people who ask us hard questions and tell us hard truths; people who call us into being more fully the people God made us to be.

It's a funny thing about preaching. It causes you to look closely at your life and the life of the community you serve as you look closely at the Gospel. It leads you look at your life through the lens of scripture. This week I've been reflecting on our life together—the moments you have been Canaanite woman to me, the moments I've been Canaanite woman to you, and the moments when someone or something from the outside has been Canaanite woman to us—the moments we've struggled together to come to a deeper understanding of who we are called to be. I've come to think of those moments as sacred moments—times when we challenge one another to change and to grow; times when, by staying in conversation and by saying our truth, we call out the Christ in one another; times when, like that Canaanite woman, we enlarge one another's understanding of who we are and what we are called to do; times when we, like Jesus change our understanding of ourselves and of our mission.

I have come to love the Jesus I meet in this story. He's Jesus at his most human—limited, caught by his own prejudices and narrow understandings, yet capable of changing and growing more fully into the beloved child of God he is and was and ever more will be. A Jesus I can follow. Thanks be to God.