

Sermon preached August 17, 2008
Church of the Servant, Wilmington, NC
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Today's gospel passage is an important one. It is so important in our tradition that it is the basis for a prayer embedded in the Rite I service of Holy Eucharist. In the service, we pray for God's mercy just before receiving communion, for "we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table..." It's also an interesting passage because the woman who is talking with Jesus stands out. Many of those who converse with Jesus are shown in two dimensions, so to speak. They are simply there as a trigger for Jesus, to inspire or hear his comments. But this woman has personality.

We don't know what Jesus is doing when she comes to him. He has traveled to the coastal towns of Tyre and Sidon. She asks him to heal her daughter, and his response seems quite negative. On first reading, he seems to be brushing her off as an annoyance or even insulting her. Yet she persists and in the end he does what she asks. Nevertheless we are left wondering about how the Lord we know as compassionate can be so rude as to ignore and apparently to insult a woman in need.

This passage, like so many in scripture, says much more to us when we look at it carefully, line by line. The conversation unfolds in a regular pattern: she speaks, he responds; she speaks, he responds, and so on. In the first exchange, she asks that he heal her daughter. He responds with silence. We should not jump to any conclusions here. We do not know what his silence means. Is he finishing a prayer? Is he deciding what to say to her? Or is he just trying to ignore her?

You know, this is a point we often meet in our personal prayer. We begin the prayer, then pause and are met with silence. Silence can be peaceful, or even welcoming. But more often we experience it as emptiness. We might wonder where God is, or if God is listening at all. An expert on prayer, Anthony Bloom, a Russian Orthodox abbot, wrote a little book called *Beginning to Pray*. In it, he notes that our early attempts to pray often seem to receive no response. But, he suggests, perhaps that is a kindness on God's part. Perhaps God is waiting until we are better prepared to hear an answer. Or perhaps we are not spiritually ready to be in God's presence. Too many would-be prayer-ers give up when met with silence. But in today's gospel, the woman presses on to the next exchange with Jesus.

She speaks, asking again for healing for the child. This time, before Jesus can respond, the disciples—like a chorus in a Greek play—break in. It is as if they stand to one side, articulating what they think Jesus must feel: "She's annoying! Tell her to go away!" But they have it wrong. Jesus responds to her with an explanation. "You see, I am here with a particular purpose—an important purpose. I am searching for those of my people who are spiritually lost." I imagine one of us on a hospital elevator, going to care for a loved one. Someone else on the elevator says, "Can you go get me a cup of coffee?" You tell them that you are there with a purpose; you must go care for your loved one.

At this point, the woman could have been put off. She could have believed the disciple chorus. We have moments like this one in prayer also. The thought crosses our mind that God may have something more important to do than to respond to us. God may be busy with earthquake victims somewhere, or with those whose lives are horrible beyond our imagining. At this point some voice in our head may ask just who we think we are, bothering God with problems that seem small compared to others. You know, this is a sentiment that is sometimes said out loud and that just doesn't work for me. I'm having a terrible time so someone tries to make me feel better by saying, "Well, just look at the *worse* time that person over there is having." OK, maybe perspective sometimes helps, but in general why would it make my problem any less to know of others' struggles. My problem is still there!

The woman is not put off. On her knees, she asks Jesus again. And this is the point where Jesus gives a response that sounds harsh. "Woman, it is not right to take the children's bread and give it to dogs." I cannot explain this wording. Maybe he is just making the same point he made earlier—that his mission, his words, have a particular, defined, purpose... that they just don't fit her situation. If I'm working on a vintage Mercedes, I can't give the parts to you to fix your new mini Cooper. If I'm carrying in the birthday cake, candles burning, I'm not going to put it in front of just anyone. It goes to the birthday girl. Maybe this is what he means, but his use of the image of a dog doesn't seem right.

Once again, this can parallel our experience in prayer. We can wonder if we are good enough to speak to God, to be in touch with God. After all, we've made a lot of mistakes, we have "left undone those things which we ought to have done and we have done those things which we ought not to have done." Maybe God's silence is telling us that we are spiritual slugs. Maybe only more advanced people are in tune with God. Maybe God only heals those who pray in the right way, who live in the right way... But, in the gospel, the woman persists. Not only does she persist, she uses Jesus' own words in her reply. In this way she seems to point out the implied insult and at the same time let it go.

Jesus' reply reflects the twist in the story. The pattern of his responses shifts. She says: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs may eat the crumbs from their masters' table." You can almost see Jesus' eyes widen as he looks at her. "Woman, your faith is great!" I see him shaking his head, smiling at her. She knew he could do it and she persisted. He responds: "Go, your daughter is healed."

Once again, Jesus listens. Once again, Jesus heals. Once again, Jesus engages with an outsider. Like the woman at the well, like Mary Magdalene of the seven devils, like the man whose name was Legion who lived in a graveyard cutting himself—like so many others—an outsider receives grace. This story is a blessing not only because of the wonderful woman it introduces or because of the light it sheds on our personal prayer practices, but also because it reminds us again that Jesus loves the Other. What good news for us who are—at least sometimes—the Other ourselves. And what good news for us as a congregation which is called to serve the Others in this world.