

Genesis 45:1-15
St Thomas, Medina
August 20, 2017
Pentecost 11

Proper 15A Psalm 133
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32
Matthew 15:[10-20], 21-28
The Rev. Karen Haig

Persistence

“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Pfew. Weren't you glad to get to that part? I mean, that's the Jesus we all know and love, right? The one who has compassion on all who are wounded, sick or oppressed, the one who performs healing after healing, miracle after miracle. The one whose arms, stretched wide on the cross encompass the whole wide world... I'm glad he finally got there. But you have to admit, it was a bit of a rough go...

For many of us, this is a difficult story to hear. It's a story about a tenacious, persistent mother who wants God's mercy for her sick daughter, and who won't quit until she gets it. It's also a story about Jesus – the only one of its kind in scripture. Oh there are other stories of persistent women who wouldn't quit until they'd received the blessing or mercy or justice they so desperately needed. But there are no stories about Jesus quite like this story.

Granted, at this time in his life, things weren't going so well for Jesus. The people in his own home town could see nothing but their own ordinariness in him, and so they rejected his wisdom, his power and his love. He was so disheartened by their lack of faith, Matthew tells us, that he didn't work many miracles at all before he left Nazareth. Add to that the news he'd just received from the disciples of John the Baptizer, that John had died at the hands of a very clever dancing girl and her scheming mother. Jesus had been followed by hordes of people for days on end, he'd fed 5,000 of them just days before, and no matter where he went there was no end to the sickness, the suffering, the needs of so very many people, all of them wanting something from him. And of course the scribes and the Pharisees were still lurking around, trying to trip him up so they'd have grounds to get rid of him. Well, it was all just too much, and it's not so hard to understand why Jesus might have been a bit testy with that very persistent and noisy Canaanite.

“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” This wasn't the first time a woman had inappropriately approached him, but at least the last one had the good sense not to cry out. We don't know what Jesus made of her cries, but his response was utter silence. Not a word. Not even a glance in her direction. It's shocking, really, this utter disregard for one crying out for mercy. It's a side of Jesus we've not seen before. She calls and calls and calls to him until the disciples beg him to send her away, she's irritating them so. But he didn't send her away. Instead he said “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” She is a Canaanite so of course she doesn't live in the house of Israel, but what Jesus means is that his mercy is not for her, it's for the Jews. They're the lost sheep of Israel. It seems that was true, at least at the time Jesus thought it was true. You see, God's people, the people called Israel, had

waited a very long time for God's promised messiah, and in all of their waiting, God's people lost their way. They began to forget who and whose they were. And so when Jesus finally came among them, they began to see God's promise fulfilled- the promise that it would be Israel, God's chosen ones, who would bring God's redeeming love to the world. Jesus really wasn't focused on the whole wide world at this point, but couldn't he have offered just a little mercy to this persistent, heartsick mother? Apparently not. And so the Canaanite fell to her knees, begging him "Lord help me." We know this place of sheer desperation, we've uttered these words ourselves... yet I'd venture that not a one of us has heard the response she heard. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

This is not the Jesus we think we know. Regardless of the circumstances, the pressure, the death of his beloved John, the fact that Jesus himself has been rejected by his own people, this is a shocking response, a response that would have sent most of us running. Nevertheless, she persisted. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table," she tells him, and in that moment, absolutely everything changed, for the Canaanite, for her daughter, and for Jesus too. In a most unusual and extraordinary turn of events, this foreigner, this outsider, the one with the wrong color skin and the wrong sort of religion, the wrong social class and even the wrong gender, this woman is the way God chose to invite Jesus to reimagine God's dream for the world. In that moment of recognizing the Canaanite's deep faith, Jesus suddenly knew himself to belong not just to the lost sheep of Israel, but to everyone, everywhere. No matter their skin color, no matter their class, no matter their gender, their religion or lack thereof. God's inexhaustible love and mercy are poured out for the life of the whole wide world, and I delight in the reality that this lesson came to Jesus as it comes to us, from a mother who loved her child so much that she would never, ever give up on what she knew to be true. Racism, classism, sexism all rise to try to defeat her, and she is tenacious in the face of all of them.

This story is so important for us today. God's world can't wait for those of us who know what is right but don't speak up, can't wait while we say our prayers and expect God to take care of everything, can't wait while we stop trying because things become difficult or uncomfortable or awkward or throw up our hands and cry out "It's too much, I've nothing left, I can't take on one more thing." Not when our Muslim sisters and brothers are being threatened, not when our Jewish sisters and brothers are being targeted, not when there are over 900 hate groups alive and well in our country, nine of them in Washington and one of them headquartered right here in Bellevue. No, not when armed young men march through the streets asserting that God is on their side and that they will do "God's work" of destroying anyone who doesn't look like them or think like them or God forbid, act like them. We can no longer walk around in the world as though God's mercy, God's justice, God's love are some sort of abstractions. They weren't abstractions for that persistent Canaanite mother. They aren't abstractions for us and they aren't abstractions for Heather Heyer's mother either. Heather died in the recent Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, and her persistent and tenacious mother echoes the Canaanite mother who came 2,000 years before her. *"Let's have the uncomfortable dialogue," she said. "We are*

going to have our differences, we are going to be angry with each other, but let's channel that anger not into hate, not into violence, not into fear... let's channel it into righteous action."

Knowing that God loves all of us, every single one is a good place to begin, but that is only a beginning. Righteous action is our call. We need to remember that we are the way God's justice and mercy and love show up in the world. And in order for that to happen, we need to take action. We need to lift our voices against those who would say that God's love is for some and not all, and take our places in assuring the dignity of everyone, everywhere. The time of watching from the sidelines must finally be over.

"But what can I do?" we ask ourselves. "The whole wide world seems to be spinning out of control, I am just one person, what can I do?" Well, my dears, we can begin by remembering the Canaanite mother and her absolute certainty that God's love and justice and mercy are for everyone. And then pick one thing, one thing that matters deeply to you, and say your prayers, asking God how to be of use. Maybe you'll organize a prayer vigil. Maybe you'll talk with someone who doesn't look like you. Maybe you'll refuse to say you're too busy, that you've nothing left. Maybe you'll write a letter, make a phone call, organize a neighborhood conversation. I don't know just exactly what you need to do, but if you say your prayers and listen, you'll know. And once you know, ask God to help you find a way to take action because thinking good thoughts, saying your prayers and having good intentions is no longer enough. There are so many things we can do to bring God's love into our broken and suffering world. When you hear something hateful, say something. Spread tolerance through conversation, social media, at home, at school, at work. Hold hope and never, ever, ever give up. There is nothing more powerful than God's love working in the world through you. So find your place. Do what only you can do, and remember that love is stronger than hate, stronger than injustice, stronger than fear. Remember that love changes everything. Amen.