

“Puzzled Disciples and a Puzzling, Not-So-Gentle Savior”
Matthew 15:21-31

Our savior is not so gentle this morning and indeed a little puzzling. A woman cries for help. Jesus keeps right on walking. Later, she dares to come before him, and he tries to deflect her. I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, he says. He sounds even harsh: it’s not fair to take the children’s food (that is the good stuff God has provided for his chosen people) and throw it to the dogs.

The woman engages Jesus in an argument, and wins the argument. Well, even the dogs get to eat the scraps. It’s all rather puzzling. We expect Jesus to win arguments, not to lose them. And we are surprised to find ourselves agreeing with the woman’s point of view.

Now, the story has a happy ending. Her daughter his healed. The woman is commended for her great faith...

But the middle has parts that we cannot explain or explain away. It is puzzling for Jesus to be silent when someone cries out for help. It isn’t like Jesus to tell someone “no.” It isn’t like Jesus to lose an argument.

I will leave it to you to make sense of all this. Was Jesus testing her faith? Engaging her in debate so she could find the full extent of his power and love? In other words, turning this into a teaching moment?

Probably, but instead of trying to explain it away, I'll let the tension linger. I'll leave you to ponder how it is that Jesus loses an argument, and so graciously and quickly.

We know at least this much: when it is over the woman is commended for great faith, and her daughter is cured. And we know at least this much, that having stopped to speak to the woman, Jesus wasn't about to let her go away without receiving some grace. But he sure goes about it in a puzzling way.

The disciples must have been puzzled as well. They tell her to go away, but then Jesus stops and engages the woman, but then again he tells her his mission is not to her, not to foreigners, not to Gentiles, but then they are astounded to see that she debates him. And wins. And he agrees to help her.

And I wonder if the key to this story is not Jesus acting in a puzzling way, and the key is not even the wonderful audacious faith of this woman who knows that even if it's only a scrap, a scrap of Jesus' power is enough for her journey. No, the key to the story, as Matthew tell it, is the disciples.

Now Matthew has gotten this story from Mark, but Mark leaves out the role of the disciples. Matthew includes the role of the disciples and because he does, we can fairly surmise that their role is crucial.

There's a delicious honesty in the Bible about the disciples. After all, they are the chosen ones, the special ones, the ones entrusted with the message of Jesus, the message of salvation. And yet, in the Bible, the disciples are never presented as superheroes; they are people, real people, who are just as likely not to get it as they are to make Jesus proud. The Bible tells us that one disciple betrayed Jesus, another denied him. Others fussed at a woman who anointed Jesus' feet with oil; others, in response to Jesus' call to service, demanded a special position, to sit at his side when he came in glory.

So, why is the Bible so honest when it comes to the disciples? Let me offer three reasons, all somehow related to one another, I suspect. Reason one: it's the truth. The disciples were like that, sometimes perplexed, sometimes wrong, sometimes courageous, sometimes timid. But then someone might raise the objection: just because it's the truth, doesn't mean we need to tell it.

I mean, would you want the world to know the whole truth about your life? I wouldn't either. Which leads to reason number two: you have to remember the disciples were revered in the early church; they themselves performed miracles, and so there would be a tendency to worship these men. After all, it would not be such a large leap to go from worshiping Jesus to worshiping Peter....unless we see that these men are just... men. Honor them, yes, but only worship Jesus.

And reason number three: the disciples are mirrors. When we look at the disciples, at Peter and James and John, Andrew, Judas, Matthew and the rest, we see ourselves. We see the church, the body of Christ, the ones to whom is given today the task of presenting life-affirming and saving faith.

We and the disciples struggle with the same ultimate question: what does it mean to follow Christ?

So, let's look in the mirror.

Jesus and his disciples have left Galilee, their Jewish base of operations, probably because the controversy with the Pharisees and authorities threatens to boil over. John the Baptist, another religious reformer, if you will, has just been beheaded, so Jesus and his group come to this land of the Gentiles, of the unclean if you will.

Unexpectedly a woman cries out for help. "Lord son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering from demon-possession."

And Jesus is silent. Doesn't even acknowledge that she is there. Rather unlike Jesus, wouldn't you say? I think I know what is going on. Jesus is waiting for the disciples to act. The disciples. The mirror. The mirror of you, me, the church. What are we going to do?

Jesus is silent. Doesn't say a word. So the disciples come up to him and urge him... and we expect them to say, "She needs your help. Stop. Look. Listen.." But that's not what they say. Just the opposite. "Send her way, for she keeps bothering us." For you see, she is the wrong sort of person to call upon Jesus, isn't she? First of all, she is a woman; woman weren't supposed to talk to holy men. Secondly, she is a foreigner. Not our kind. Thirdly, her faith is deficient. She isn't a Jew. Doesn't keep Kosher. Doesn't keep the law. Fourth, her daughter is demon-possessed.

They weren't quite sure what that meant, but they knew this: somehow or another, it was this woman's fault. Because religious people are always looking to blame troubled people themselves for their troubles. It absolves us of a certain sense of responsibility.

Drug abusers, alcoholics, the poor, gamblers, single moms with three kids. They did it to themselves, so we don't need to care.

Send her away, the disciples said. She's the kind of person we get to ignore. She's the kind of person we don't have to concern ourselves with. We can even dislike her. She is so wrong, so foreign, so unholy.

Send her away, Jesus.

And what a sad commentary when disciples discourage, instead of encourage, people to come to a relationship with Jesus Christ. Anyway.

But then Jesus himself puzzles us. Jesus seems to agree with the disciples. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

In other words, my mission is limited. Limited to the right people, the good, the godly, those who look like us and act like us. That doesn't sound like Jesus, does it? But it sure sounded good to the disciples. He seemed to agree with their prejudice, seemed to agree with their assessment that this woman was the wrong sort to call upon the Lord.

"Send her away, Jesus." OK, she doesn't count. She's not one of us.

But then Jesus does not sent her away.

He was sent to Israel, but that doesn't mean he has no care, no concern, no love, for others.

And however harsh the dialogue seems to us, however much Jesus does not sound like a gentle shepherd, we must never forget. He does not send her away. He does engage her. He wants her to respond. He wants her to express her faith, both for her own sake, but more than that, for the sake of the disciples. Let them see first-hand that their attitude, send her away, has no place among the people of Christ.

Let them see that even those outside the mission, if you will, can find a place in the love of Christ.

Woman, there's no place for you, the disciples think. But Jesus, whose use of the word bread is not by accident, Jesus who will break bread as a sign of God's abundance, Jesus who calls himself the bread of the world, Jesus, who will finally use bread as sign and symbol of his very body, wants his disciples to hear. This all-wrong woman has a place. Through faith, she will eat of the bread of life as well. "Woman, great is your faith." That's what Jesus says to the woman. Notice he doesn't make any comment at all about the disciples' faith.

Well, that's what happened, but what does it mean? If the disciples are a mirror, then I find my faith again challenged. That in Christ's eyes, everyone is valuable, no one is beyond God's reach. When I might be tempted to say, send her away, Jesus words are ultimately one of welcome and healing, of renewal and new beginnings.

Oh, she was the wrong sort of woman. We, like the disciples sometimes get tired of folks who don't measure up. But Jesus does not let us think like that.

But there again, sometimes I find it easy to tell ethnic jokes. Sometimes it is so easy to fuss and complain at waitresses who get the order wrong. Sometimes I find it easy to fuss about welfare babies, and see them as objects wasting my hard- earned money, instead of precious children whom God loves. Sometimes I get exasperated with migrant workers who get ahead of me in line at the convenience store, and because they can't speak English, take up my time, and then I can't enjoy the vegetables which, in all probability they harvested, and they are probably illegal aliens anyway.

Send her away. She isn't one of us. She's intruding upon our lives. Sometimes disciples then and now cannot help but feel this way. And it is then that Jesus in his gentle way reminds his church again that such people are not intrusions, they are opportunities; And it is then that Jesus in his gentle way reminds his church the very ones I would sometimes seek to exclude from my life, are also the ones for whom he gave his life.

And it is then that I reflect on those times in my life when I have felt like that woman. Alone.

Desperate. A stranger. And how thankful I am that even amidst all the clamor of life, somehow he does hear my cry. And stops. And notices even me. Amen.