

A Larger Faith

Pr 18 Yr B September 5, 2021 Mark 7:24-37
Rev. Peter Smith <http://www.stjamesuc.com>

When I was in my early twenties, I bought my first car and finally felt like an adult. One day I was backing out of my parents driveway, got too close to the fence, and put a noticeable dent in my car. I was horrified and spoke to my father who looked it over and told me it wasn't serious and could easily be fixed and suggested someone who could make the repair. A couple of days later I had to go away for work and left my car in their driveway.

I mentioned the dent to my father as I was leaving and he repeated it wasn't major and who could fix it. I went to the job and when I returned a couple of months later my car was still in the driveway and so was the dent. I was about to ask why my father hadn't arranged to have my car repaired when it struck me. My father had told me what needed to be done and who could do it. And it was my car and my responsibility to take care of it.

This morning's gospel lesson is a conversation between Jesus and a woman looking for help because her daughter is suffering. And the exchange sounds wrong to our ears because when the woman begs for his help Jesus answers her by saying that it isn't right for the children's food to be thrown to the dogs. But before I go any further I want to stop and point out something important.

Jesus heals the woman's daughter at the end of their conversation. And that is something we need to remember because when we recognize that the question becomes not whether Jesus is going to heal her daughter but why this conversation takes place. Because their conversation, the back and forth between Jesus and the woman, shows us something important about God's love and grace.

In the ancient world there is a clear division between the Jewish people and those who are not Jewish, the gentiles. Jesus is foretold in the Jewish scriptures, he is from the house and lineage of David, the Jewish king, and he comes as the Messiah of the Jewish people. So the assumption is that his message, his ministry, his miracles are intended for the Jews.

And the text makes it very clear that the woman who comes to Jesus for help is a gentile, she isn't a Jew, and she is actually Syrophenician, a people who were not merely from outside the faith but often the enemies of the Jewish people.

And yet the text is also clear that she comes to Jesus looking for help. I presume

because she is desperate and she hopes, she believes, she thinks that Jesus may be able to heal her daughter. Which leads to her asking for help. Which leads to that response from Jesus about the children's food being thrown to the dogs.

And there is no doubt that Jesus is clearly saying that there is a separation between her people and the Jewish people. That the children of Abraham are within the promises of God and her people, the gentiles fall outside of that faith. And before I get to her response and what happens I want to take a moment to talk about why Jesus might say such a thing.

First I think he says those words because every single person listening to their exchange at that moment is thinking it. The disciples, the crowd, and probably even the woman herself are thinking that she doesn't deserve the blessing and attention of Jesus.

Yet because of what he does later I don't believe that Jesus thinks that she is beyond or outside the grace of God. Because Jesus doesn't ignore her or simply say no he pushes back at her request. He makes her state why she should get his attention and action for her daughter. He brings to the forefront the problem with her asking for his help.

And I know what Jesus says still sounds wrong but that brings me to the other point I think Jesus is trying to make and that ties into my story of the dent in my car and who was going to fix it. The truth is that sometimes we just expect God to do things for us especially the things we don't want to deal with. We expect that if we need something and ask nicely and are good enough that God will help us. And I'm not saying that God doesn't answer prayer because God does.

But sometimes God expects us to be part of the answer we need and to take responsibility for what we want and what needs to happen in our lives and our world. And God always asks for us to trust, rely, and listen to how God responds and what God calls us to do and be as followers of Jesus.

Because faith isn't simply us asking and God doing. It is us, you and me, being open, willing, and able to turn to and allow God to act in a way that not merely changes the world but also changes us. So think about it for a moment. If Jesus simply heals the daughter of the woman, a woman from outside the faith, what would happen? Yes, the daughter would be healed. But remember that happens in the story anyway.

Yet if Jesus simply gives her what she wants the woman, the disciples, and the crowd won't have a different understanding of who is in and out of the faith, who Jesus is, and

the message of salvation and neither would those of us who follow Jesus down through the ages.

Which is why I think Jesus pushes back at her request. Not to say no but in order to change her and the people listening. Because this is where in our story the woman answers by reinterpreting the words he uses. Jesus talks about feeding the dogs before the children. And she replies by saying that even the dogs eat the crumbs from the table because it isn't one or the other but both in different ways.

A line which changes the whole situation. The syrophenician woman doesn't argue that she is exactly the same as a Jewish person because she isn't. She doesn't dispute that they have the better understanding of what Jesus is doing because of their scripture and tradition. She simply states that there is an answer from Jesus for her situation because she thinks, she hopes, she believes that there is a bounty, a plentiful grace, in what Jesus preaches.

And that is when Jesus says because of what you say your daughter has been healed. Which is surprising not just because Jesus heals her daughter but how he heals her daughter. The woman asks for him to come and work a miracle for her child. She expects like we do that he would put his hands on her head, say something, and the child would be healed. And yet when Jesus challenges the woman and she replies with an answer that pushes to a new understanding of who the Jewish Messiah is and what grace is, Jesus heals her daughter instantly for the woman goes home and finds her child free from her affliction. Her faith allows Jesus to give more than the woman expects or thinks possible.

Now we live in a world much different than the first century. If I asked who deserves God's mercy and hope I think everyone here would answer everyone does. And yet the truth is that we still put up barriers between those who we think should have God's blessing and those who shouldn't. We still look at people who live bad lives, never go to church or believe, who look and sound different from us, and don't see them within the promises of God. And yet what Jesus teaches us is that even if we don't see them as our equals at the table they can still share in the love and grace God offers to us.

And perhaps more importantly those outside of our faith are some of the people whose understanding and experience of God will challenge and force us to look again at what we think and believe. For they will often show us that the grace and love of God are greater, more amazing, and more wonderful than even we, the ones who have felt and known and heard of that grace, have ever imagined.