

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 19th and 20th, 2023

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The Canaanite (Syro-Phoenician) Woman

Today's Gospel passage has been for me, one of the most unsettling passages in the New Testament, that is until recently when I began to truly grapple and pray with it in an Ignatian fashion. For us, the Jesus we have always encountered and embraced is the Jesus whose actions and message have been clearly ones of empathy, compassion, mercy and kindness. And yet here, it is as if we are unable to recognize Jesus at all!

But I would like you to imagine with me that it is twilight. The sun is slowly fading, leaving a glistening rim of silver at the edge of the clouds. The sky is awash with lovely shades of lavender, peach, and pink. The only sound to be heard is the song of the birds and the sleepy murmurings of a band of young men walking with Jesus. It is just the type of night that Jesus might have been craving.

For you can see that Jesus is exhausted, it is written all over his face and in the way he carries his body. It is as if his heart, his bones, his entire being, suffer from fatigue and weariness. Even the beauty of the night sky seems to be lost on him.

He has spent the last several days healing the sick, feeding a crowd of 5000, teaching to the masses, laying hands on those who are in need of forgiveness, listening to those who need a listening ear, being present to any who are in need of God's loving touch and lastly facing a confrontation with the Pharisees that totally saps him of his energy. Every last ounce of his capacity to do God's work seems to have been drained from his spirit.

He and his disciples have taken a different route home, traversing through the land of Canaan. Why, you might ask, would Jesus travel through this nation rather than taking a shorter route home through Israel? Has Jesus perhaps chosen to navigate through Canaan, a pagan nation with whom Israel had once been at war, in order to distance himself, perhaps take a respite from his Jewish brothers and sisters who have been unceasingly clamoring for his attention? Jesus, after all was not only fully divine but fully human as well, a concept we are at many times apt to dismiss. Jesus needed his alone time and a much needed rest. All that he desires now is a place to lay his head. I can't help but recall a scene in a film about Jesus where Mary and Joseph are on their long, tiring journey to Bethlehem, Mary astride a donkey and Joseph in ragged sandals leading them over dusty, rocky terrain. As they come to a stream Mary slips off the donkey, removes Joseph's sandals and gently let's the cool water flow over his feet as she gently massages them. How much Jesus would have needed that care right now as he and his disciple make their way through Canaan.

As Jesus and the disciples continue on route, suddenly, out of nowhere, the sound of a Canaanite woman's voice pierces the silence, a voice whose tenor is one of grave distress, emanating deep within her soul. "Have mercy on me Lord, son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon."

What is it that gives this woman such incredible courage? After all, she is an outcast, a person who is socially marginalized, and what's more, a woman! Cultural mores prevented women from speaking to a man in public and yet she blatantly ignores the laws and boldly cries out again and again. "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me." One may have thought to his or herself, such incredulous audacity this woman possesses!!

Was it love for her daughter, a love that indeed reflected the love God has for God's own children that bolstered her courage and later perhaps gave Jesus cause to pause and reflect? And what about Jesus' response or lack thereof, for her request is met with a resounding silence, a dismissal. And yet she persists in her pleading. She has made herself vulnerable, not caring what others may THINK of her or DO to her. Her love is sacrificial, a love that was made manifest at the time she conceived her daughter in her womb, and that love never wavered.

Jesus turns his back on her to explain to his disciples that his "Israel First" policy, is that he has come only for the lost sheep of Israel. This means that granting the woman's request is NOT part of his job description.

By this time, it seems likely that a crowd has gathered around. And still the woman persists. And then come the words that totally confound us, that seem so callous and insensitive. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," dogs being the terminology given to the Canaanites for whom the Israelites harbored feelings of mistrust and dislike. And yet throughout this encounter the woman remains respectful. Vulnerable and humiliated as she may be, she does not become angry, nor does she return insult for insult but remains steadfast in her mission. Furthermore, she seems to have known somehow that the God of Israel is a compassionate God and that this Jesus of Nazareth, despite this disheartening encounter, is compassionate as well. And so with her own accrued wisdom she appeals to both his heart and head replies, quite astutely, "Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from their masters table."

It seems clear at this point that Jesus indeed does have, what I would call an "Aha" moment. This outsider has helped Jesus to call into question his own belief that his mission is only to the house of Israel. It is understandable that up until this time Jesus felt his mission was only to Israel as Jesus was steeped in his Jewish faith, a faith that made this concept quite clear. To step away from this belief was a major breakthrough in his understanding of his mission, a new understanding that helped him to see that he had come to bring God's message of love to the entire world, not only to Israel, but that each and every person, no matter their nationality, gender, sexual orientation, the color of their skin, their political affiliation were all included.

Jesus, with this deepened understanding, reaches out immediately to grant the woman's request and heal her daughter. Her faith, her love, her wisdom and persistence have reawakened the compassionate, empathetic, merciful heart of Jesus and helped him to see with new eyes.

Just as an aside, I find it interesting to note here that Jesus, throughout the gospels changed his mind only twice and each time that change of heart was prompted by a woman, first by his mother at the marriage feast of Cana and now by the Canaanite woman!

What can we gain from this story? After reflecting for some time I realize that much of what I have taken away from the story I had already internalized however that doesn't mean that those lessons need not be reinforced.

First and foremost, is that we need to embrace the humanity of Jesus. All too often we put that important aspect of who he was aside. When I reflect on this story I have come to see Jesus as more approachable, a person with the same experiences that we have. We too, (at least me,) may have a tendency from time to time to lash out at the ones we love most, when like Jesus, we are overtired or heavily burdened. Jesus' transformation and growing into his divinity took place over a period of time. He didn't hop out of his cradle knowing that he was God but like all of us, his spiritual growth and his growing into his authentic self took place over a period of time as he encountered people, events, time spent in nature that he then reflected upon. It took root in his prayer and his alone time as he stooped down to listen intently to his heart. Slowly he grew in "wisdom, age and grace."

Joyce Rupp reminds us that "growth takes place on the journey not at the goal post." The chrysalis needs its allotted time in the cocoon before it emerges into a beautiful butterfly. Nothing in a garden pops up instantly without the sun and rain to nourish it. In one of her poems, (and I get a good chuckle out of this), Sylvia Boorstein addresses the slow process of spiritual growth by describing a cartoon where a father of a desert clan, traveling upon their camels, is chiding his children saying, "Stop saying are we there yet, were nomads for crying out loud."

Joyce Rupp reminds us once again that "Faith and spiritual growth is often more about the journey than it is about the destination." Having said this, those infrequent "Aha" moments like those that Jesus experienced in today's gospel, can begin to transform a part of our spiritual growth almost instantaneously, as long as we have the where with all to act on them. I must admit I do treasure those times I had spent with my high school students, when after a class discussion or lecture they would exclaim "Wow I never thought about it like that."

If we live with a listening heart to the deepening places of our lives, our encounters with others, the events of our lives, our quiet experiences in nature our, Aha moments, our prayer and contemplation, if we listen to the voices of the lowly and

downtrodden, to those who are excluded, we will be more receptive to God's holy wisdom and God revealing God's self to us.

It is then that we will truly begin to understand and grow into embracing what it means when we say that each of us has the divine spark within us. We will be well on our way to becoming our authentic selves.

Another lesson I take away from today's scripture is that yes, we need to be compassionate, to be empathic, to see and act according to our hearts. (Wasn't it Antoine de Saint-Exupe'ry who said in the Little Prince that "it is only with the heart that one sees rightly" but that said ,we cannot extend ourselves so much that our heart's capacity to respond to others needs begins to shut down. We need to embrace what I call a" healthy selfishness". We need, as Jesus did, periods of rest and personal nourishment. It is only then that we are more apt to respond with love to those in need.

And finally the last of the many lessons that we might embrace is that we need to come to terms with the fact that our own take on the world and its' people is only a partial view. As Fr. Davd Mc Callom tells us, "We need to form relationships with people who see and act differently than we do in order for us to have a more comprehensive view. "

Further, it seems not possible to be totally united with Christ without being united to the larger body of Christ.

To put a little spin on the conclusion of today's gospel passage, I would like to imagine Jesus going to sleep that night with a smile on his face, a smile because he has helped a woman in dire need, a smile, that due to the persistence of a woman, he has deepened his understanding of what his actual mission is and lastly he may express a little chuckle as he nods off, realizing that this incredible woman has, with her wisdom and wit, been able to beat him at his own debating skills, drawing upon and manipulating his own rhetoric....

"Yes Lord", yet even the dogs eat the scraps from the master's table."