

20th Sunday 2014 Matthew 15: 21-28

Neither Luke nor John include this story of the Canaanite woman in their gospels, and no wonder. It is such an unattractive and misleading story. It portrays Jesus as unwelcoming: he does not bother responding to the woman's first anguished plea. He seems prejudiced and the player of mind-games; he is rude and insensitive. Any sincere follower of Jesus finds this uncharacteristic and repellent. The story does not show the Jesus we know or believe in. Interpreters through the ages have viewed this story as an exhortation to persist in prayer, and trample down obstacles. We should be confident that God's yes to us always lies underneath the appearances of no. These are helpful lessons. But they don't remove every problem presented by the story. The patriotic narrowness of Jesus is only gradually and reluctantly left behind. Perhaps this shows us how even Jesus had to process new material which went against the grain of his pre-conditioning.

A more helpful aspect of the story is its portrayal of the woman as an outsider. We could learn how she constructively manages that hurtful situation. When we ourselves are the outsider, whether by color or some other "difference," we experience feelings of isolation and resentment. We know that the opposing forces are wrong and undeserved. But it is hard to fight the insiders. If the struggle is ongoing, we can become bitter and reactive. We get stuck and let the other side win.

This is the wrong solution. Passivity in the face of humiliation or evil has sometimes been presented as a Christian virtue. Therese the Little Flower was said to smile when dirty dish water was thrown in her face. I myself find this story inauthentic, not true to the subversive and feisty qualities of her "little way."

A more helpful source of practical wisdom for handling unfairness in your life is found in the Old Testament story of Joseph. (This story contains the beautiful line, "I am your brother Joseph," so it can serve as incidental tribute to our diamond jubilarian, who resembles his namesake only in *later* parts of the story.) One of its minor points is that we sometimes unwittingly contribute to the injustice of our situation. Had Joseph not been an annoying goody-goody, a tell-tale twerp, his brothers would not have hated him or sold him into slavery. But their father's poor parenting, his preferential treatment of Joseph, was really the culprit. Joseph did not choose this. He nevertheless had to overcome it.

I wish we had time to follow all the stages by which Joseph rebuilt his character, his gradual and slow process of self-healing. We would examine his acceptance of injustice, which got worse in Egypt when he was falsely accused and sent to prison. There he managed to “re-frame” his situation and use it creatively for his own advantage. He was able to turn outward, to help fellow-prisoners and ultimately Pharaoh, with his gift for dream-interpretation. He in fact saves the country in which he is an alien from economic disaster.

The climactic scene is reconciliation with his brothers. He could have taken revenge but chose not to. It must be admitted he indulged in some cat-and-mouse torture when he detained his brother Benjamin. This is more of a literary device to give suspense than a model for behavior. On the other hand, it might show that true forgiveness is not spineless or mealy-mouthed. To cave in too quickly is to trivialize the violation and delay the resolution. To really forgive an enemy is tricky business.

The Joseph story is a saga, unfolding over an extended period of time. Time is necessary to shift awareness. Joseph has time to construct an identity and find a mission; his brothers have time to develop regret for their brutality. Together, Joseph and his brothers represent the need to forgive and be forgiven. Many of us need to forgive ourselves, which goes deeper than superficially letting ourselves “off the hook.”

Joseph gives the moral of his story. “What you intended for evil against me, God has used for good, to save the lives of many people.” It is a subtle ending to a complicated story. It encourages us to find the spiritual meaning in our own lives. What feel like random, disconnected happenings may actually have a hidden pattern when evaluated in hindsight. Returning to the Canaanite woman, we begin to see what an original character she is. I admire how her calling out annoys the overly conventional disciples, who want to send her away. Though a pagan, she prays to Jesus as Lord and Son of David; she has done her homework. Though distracted by her daughter’s torment, she is incredibly sharp in verbal fencing and comic timing. When Jesus says, “I can’t give the children’s food to dogs,” she gives as good as she gets: “yes, but even dogs get scraps from the children’s table.” I think she knows she has won even before Jesus answers. She has developed incredible resilience from caring for her mentally ill daughter. The tragedy has ennobled her character and elicited the healing.

What tag-line would the Canaanite woman give to her encounter with Jesus? I showed him? I beat him at his own game? I expanded his consciousness? All of these are true, yet I think she

has a quieter view of her triumph. Did she feel emotionally tired from all the obstacles she had overcome? Did she still nurse the scar of her outsider status? Did she need to forgive Jesus for his deliberate unkindness? Yes, all of these.

They could be examined later. For now, there was taking her sweet and untormented daughter by the hand. There was the opportunity for a quiet evening walk through the village. They could exchange pleasantries with neighbors who no longer had to pity them. There was the sunset to watch. There were cool breezes on the face to feel. If this were a movie, the music would play. Music is what we hear when we return to paradise, and find we are no longer outsiders. Music is what we hear when we perceive that, even in the worst of it, God was right next to us all the time.

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