

THE CANAANITE WOMAN

Sermon Preached at Wesley Hall by Rev. Dr. Ilaitia S. Tuwere in a combined St. John's/Trinity Colleges Eucharist Worship Service on Wednesday, 5th of August, 2009 at 11 am.

Scripture Readings:

Matthew – 15: 21-28

Mark – 7: 24- 30

What we have just heard from Matthew's Gospel is a remarkable story. A story of a woman who was marginalized by her own society. Remarkable because of the love and courage it conveys, and the patient and intelligent persistence it demonstrates. What are we to make of this quite remarkable passage?

Particularly, what are we to make of Jesus' rather unkind behaviour? Biblical scholars have tried to explain it away by a number of sympathetic excuses for Jesus. But this morning, let's come at it from the other side of things. Let's look at it from the perspective of this Canaanite woman.

Stories (*talanoa*) are important in our lives. Without stories there is no articulation of experience. The Bible is clear that a person's identity cannot be fully grasped through definitions but through stories. The story before us is a story about a woman. The expression of women's spiritual quest is closely related to the telling of women's stories. If women's stories are not told, the depth of women's souls will not be known.

And so this morning, I invite us all to enter into the woman's story, to look at this passage through ***her experience***. Let her be the one who speaks to us through Scripture.

Things are not going well for Jesus. From preceding chapters of this gospel, we know he has been jostled by crowds, pressured for healings, and irritated by his disciples' inability to understand. The situation with civil and religious authorities is tense and the conflict is heating up. Both Jesus and the disciples are short tempered, cross with each other. And so they move north for a break, a rest and some peace and quiet.

And then the woman appears, a Canaanite Gentile. Both of the Gospel writers, Matthew and Mark make clear that she is from a different kind of people than they, **racially and linguistically inferior**. In fact, a race to be exterminated. Gentile was bad enough, but to be a Canaanite was worse!

The woman throws herself on Jesus for help. It is clear she has prepared very well for this meeting. She has tracked Jesus (according to Mark) even inside a house where he was, trying to get away from everyone. But more than that, she has done her homework - she knows who he is. She uses his Messianic title in addressing him. She calls him **Lord**. In the entire Gospel of Mark this Gentile Greek woman is the only person to call him by that name. It was perceptive preparation.

Jesus is silent. You can understand his being unpleasant because someone now intrudes into his privacy. His disciples are not happy of this intrusion. They appeal to him to send her away, perhaps to prove to Jesus that they weren't responsible for knowing where he was. And Jesus, like anybody else who has had a very busy morning, is tired and behaves just as badly as the disciples. Did you ever hear a response reeking with more superiority? "You are not our kind", he implies; "I am to minister to my people not people like you."

But the woman comes even closer to him. You know that very special space that is around each of us, when people talk to us too close up, and we take a step backwards? Sometimes we do invite people to intimacy, perhaps by a handshake where our bodies stay a safe distance away while we connect with our hands. But only if we know someone well, do we invite them into an embrace or into that special space that is close to ourselves. This woman, however, did not let that barrier around Jesus keep her distant. She received the rebuff and then came even closer to him, kneeling, perhaps even touching his feet, and asked him to take notice of her. It was **personal presence**.

And then Jesus makes another hostile response. We need to pause a moment and look at this use of the term, "dogs". The image here may be pointing to a family meal where children eating dinner or breakfast, occasionally sneaking crust of bread to playful puppies underfoot. But something quite different was intended here.

Gentiles were indecently called “dogs” in those days. When applied to a person it always meant **contempt**. It referred to someone who was either unworthy or not appreciated. Remember in the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not give dogs what is holy or cast your pearls before swine?” Nearly all the references to “dogs” in the Hebrew Scriptures were foul references. Listen to just a couple of them: In I Kings 14: 11, dogs ate human flesh. In Exodus 11: 7, they were growling and later eating what was unclean. In Proverbs 26: 11, they return to their own vomit, and in Revelation 22: 15, dogs became paralleled with murderers, fornicators, and idolaters.

This remarkable story is inviting us to get “inside” that Gentile woman’s story. Think quietly, by yourself, of when you have been “shut out” or left out. That, I suspect will be rather easy for the women in this room. They’ll probably think first of something that has happened to them in the church, are vivid in their memory- bank. But not only women but also all those who have always been categorized as “others” in a given situation.

I remember a number of women going through the same situation back home in Fiji, in the present difficult political climate there now. *Na Marama Roko Tui Dreketi – Ro Teimumu Kepa*, paramount chief of Rewa and head of the *Burebasaga* confederacy which is one of the three main traditional institutions in the Fijian social organization. She and her people were to host the annual Methodist conference at the end of this month. She was arrested from her chiefly home in the middle of the night, taken by police and soldiers to be questioned for breaking the so called ‘law’ of the land. A woman and a Roman Catholic, to host a Methodist conference. Another woman, Mrs Rabaka, a mother who is still waiting to get a clear and true explanation as to how and why his son died in police custody after being forcefully taken away from their home in the middle of the night. These and more are some stories from Fiji of women going through the same experience of being left out by those in power and authority. Not only women but many others who have gone and are going through the same experience right across society now.

But being “shut out” is one we all should recognise. May be its when you enter a room and everyone speaks a language you don’t understand and is having a wonderful time of it.... the trouble is **you** are the foreigner. May be its during a eucharist and you are painfully aware that the table does not include you. May

be it's a position of greater responsibility which you wanted and someone else got.

A different way to put it might be: When was it that you did not have the last word? When you felt your superior never really understood your point of view; when your application for a job, or passport or visa didn't come through or was delayed intentionally; when the shop door or the airplane gate closed just as you arrived late. Think of when you were shut out, or humiliated, or left out, or ignored, or rebuffed.

In your own way and time, name your feelings about that experience? What was the feeling when the circle did not include you? How did you feel when the door shut in your face and you were on the wrong side of it? This experience was the experience this woman felt that day. She was left out. She was not allowed to be included; to participate.

And yet, participation requires more than merely opening a door and being included. Participation is **deliberate empowerment** of persons previously excluded so that there is mutual gift-giving and they become genuine partners. In the story, this woman comes back again for her third intervention --- and a strange one it was. Typical of what male society was accustomed to. It was a favourite technique of rabbinic give and take, done in the synagogue all the time: It was a kind of verbal fencing that required both wit and wisdom, intelligence and understanding: the ability to match riddle with riddle, to cap one wise saying with another, to match insult with insult. Or as here, to turn the insult into her own advantage.

Jesus replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." "Yes Lord" the woman said. "But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Since women were not formally trained for this "masculine" work, it surely must have surprised Jesus. Even Matthew cannot bear to acknowledge what she did. He does what many do ---- gives the woman credit for her piety and devotion by speaking of her "faith". But Mark may be nearer the truth when

he records, "For this saying, for this word --- which is to say, 'for this truth' ---- you may go your way." It was patient and intelligent persistence.

And all of this is what makes this story a very unique one. Usually in the Gospel tradition, a situation or event provokes a hostile question to Jesus from someone among the crowd, to which Jesus responds with a mild warning and then drives home his point by a concluding statement which his opponent would be hard-put to deny. But in this story, it is just the opposite. It is Jesus who provides the hostile saying and it is the woman whose reply trips him up and puts him on the right course.

And Jesus changes his mind! Immediately. It is the only story recorded in which Jesus reverses himself as a result of an appeal from someone else. The only time in the Gospels when someone talked back to him and Jesus accepted the rebuke. What happened, you see, is that Jesus got caught in his own parable. He was not the Good Samaritan. He really becomes one of those three travellers on the road to Jerusalem, not seeing the suffering before him, and almost ---- if it had not been for her repeated interventions --- passing by on the other side.

And that woman? She was really quite remarkable. Suffering the racist and sexist restrictions which her society placed on her, she apparently did not accept their low esteem. Since she had nothing to lose anyhow, she could gather up her courage and challenge the authority on behalf of another...for the sake of her daughter. The woman broke custom, went after what she needed, stood up to this visiting teacher and healer, and got the better of him in an argument. Finally, she got what she wanted: her daughter was healed.

Now most scholars have limited the interpretation of this story to the efforts of the early church to understand the place of Gentiles in Jesus' mission, and therefore the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in God's salvation. But if we look at it from the perspective of the woman, we may have a different *talanoa* to tell.

Here is a woman who had something to give to Jesus by enabling him to see his role in a different way. Daring and self-assertive, it was she who opened up the relationship and enabled him to act in a new way. Her gift **was not submission or obedience**. Rather, it is the gift of that **sharp insight of the**

“outsider” --- of the poor and the outcast. The marginal and minority woman of a subordinate race - who can see through a situation because they have few illusions to defend. Through her perceptive preparation, through her personal presence, through her patient and intelligent persistence, the Canaanite woman changed the course of Jesus’ self-understanding. A forceful woman who did not know her place, she sought participation in the world of Jesus and his disciples – and got it.

And Jesus is empowered by this intelligent woman as new understandings are called forth in him by this most despised of the outcast. **To empower Jesus was to participate uniquely in the good news of God’s reign.** And in so doing she changed the course of those who would be included in the liberating community, where neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free, but all would be one in Christ Jesus.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

AMEN.
