

HEALING THE SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN'S DAUGHTER

(02/11/2024)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 15:21-31 and Mark 7:24-30

“But she came and knelt before Jesus saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ He answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’” (Matthew 15:25-27)

This year, during the few weeks between Epiphany and Lent, we are taking a look at some of the healing miracles that are presented in our Bible. We are attempting to discern what factors, particularly within the afflicted persons, led to them being healed. We witness to the power of not only Jesus of Nazareth, but also the Holy Spirit to heal us from physical, emotional, and spiritual disabilities, and also to heal our relationships. There are also instances, as we have noted, where we can see ourselves in these people or in these stories. When this happens, as with a fairy tale or a dream, the story teaches us something about us.

This morning, we read the account of Jesus’ healing of the Syrophenician woman’s daughter. This healing is recorded in both Mark and Matthew. I will explain later why I think Luke, who was undoubtedly aware of the incident, might have chosen not to include this passage in his gospel.

Mark describes the woman as a Syrophenician. Matthew refers to her as a Canaanite. In describing her as a Syrophenician, Mark indicates that she is from Phoenicia, which was part of the Roman province of Syria. Matthew simply says that she is from Canaan, which is the general area outside Israel. In any event, she is a Gentile, a non-Jew, and probably a pagan, a nature worshipper.

Mark tells us that Jesus, after entering the district of Tyre, enters a house, probably the abode of one of his followers, and does not want anyone to know he is there. I suspect he needed some down time. From the scant information we have on the one to three years of his ministry, Jesus certainly crammed an awful lot into a relatively small period of time! Yet the woman, not to be deterred, searches him out and finds him. She enters the house uninvited and makes her appeal.

Matthew tells us that as Jesus travels through the region of Tyre and Sidon, a Canaanite woman from that region comes out and starts shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” This has a similarity to the account of the healing of the two blind beggars that we explored last week. The afflicted person or person reaches out to Jesus. As with the two blind beggars, the disciples try to send her away, but, like them, the woman is not dissuaded from her mission. She shouts

even louder! She shouts so loudly and so persistently that she finally draws Jesus' attention.

Let's look at the woman. We know little about her except that she is a Gentile, which means that she is not one of Jesus' people. We also know her daughter is ill. Both Mark and Matthew indicate that the little girl is tormented by a demon, an unclean spirit. That is probably what, in our time, we would call mental illness.

Let me ask a question. If you were a parent, what would you do if your child were ill? It's a rhetorical question; I think you would do anything you could! One of the most difficult situations that anyone can face is to be a parent whose child is suffering, and there is nothing the parent can do about it. Your child may be suffering from an incurable disease. Your child may be suffering from mental illness. Your child may be suffering from an addiction, like the opioid addictions that are consuming and destroying so many of our young people. And there is basically nothing you can do! You not only *feel* helpless; you *are* helpless!

I believe that we should have strong boundaries, secure borders in our country; it's just a healthy way of being—just like we should have strong, healthy boundaries in our own lives. However, I can understand why some of the families from Haiti, from Mexico, from Central and South America will do anything they can to get into the United States. If my children went to bed at night listening to gunfire in the streets, if they walked to school past severed heads placed on poles by rival drug cartels, I would do anything I could to get them across that border! I'm not saying that it's legal. All I'm saying is that we should at least understand why these families have undertaken such a long and arduous journey, and why they will break the law if that is the only way to get their children into this country. As Christians, we should understand them, and we should have compassion for them.

Back to the scripture lesson. We can understand this mother's desperation. The story is about the depth of a mother's love. It is also about the depth of a mother's faith. Her dogged determination to evoke Jesus' compassion and solicit his help is both humbling and inspiring. But it is no less than any of us would do!

Why does the woman, who is not Jewish, seek out this particular peripatetic rabbi? One possibility is that she had heard accounts of some of Jesus' healings and was curious. Since no other forms of treatment had helped her daughter, she was willing to try anything. In asking Jesus for help she may have been simply grasping at straws!

However, it doesn't feel like that in the account recorded by either Matthew or Mark. This woman is determined; she will not be dissuaded from seeking an audience with Jesus! She does not waver in her belief that Jesus, if he wills, can heal her daughter. There is not a flicker of doubt in her mind! This woman, this mother, shows us the power of faith.

There are several different types of healing that take place through or by Jesus. In some of them, the faith of the person who stands in need of healing is a crucial factor. The person who is in distress, who is suffering, reaches out to Jesus, and Jesus responds. An example of this kind of healing is the healing of the woman who touches the hem of Jesus' robe.

There are other healings where the person's faith in Jesus is not a crucial factor. There are times when Jesus, filled with compassion, just reaches out to someone who is suffering, and the person is healed. Jesus' healing of the man lame from birth by the side of the pool is an example of this.

A third category is where the healing is not tied to the faith of the person in need of healing, but it is tied to the faith of someone who loves that person. Someone, often a friend or a family member, intercedes for the person in distress. The Roman centurion who asks Jesus to heal his servant is an example of this kind of healing. We don't know anything about the faith of the centurion's servant, but we do know something about the faith of the centurion.

The mother in today's reading is an example of this third kind of healing. It is not the daughter's faith that heals her, but her mother's. The daughter is healed through her mother's faith, her mother's dogged determination, and her mother's love. This mother will not take no for an answer!

This is why we believe in the healing power of intercessory prayer. When we pray for someone who is in need, it is *our* faith, *our* belief in the power of prayer that activates or strengthens the healing power within the person for whom we pray. We can do this because, on a very deep level, both we and the person for whom we pray are embedded in a field of interconnectedness; we are embedded in a field of interrelatedness. This is why, as the writer of the Letter of James says, the prayers of the faithful have a tremendous power to heal.

But the healing miracle is only part of the mother's encounter with Jesus. Just as important, if not more important, is Jesus' dialogue with the mother. I believe that it is

through this dialogue that Jesus learns something very important about himself, who he is, and the ministry to which he has been called.

At this period in Jesus' ministry, he seems to identify himself primarily as Jewish, as a rabbi. He is of the house and lineage of David. There is no doubt that some of his disciples and many of his followers see him as the Messiah, the one whose coming was predicted by the prophets. He is the one who, as the political and religious leader of the Jewish nation, is destined to lead his people out of bondage to the Romans.

I do not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, nor do I believe he ever thought of himself as the Messiah. However, at least at this point in his ministry he does see himself as Jewish, as a rabbi. When the woman, who is a Gentile, asks for his help, he tells her that he has been sent to minister *exclusively* to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. This is a very limited focus for his ministry. He seems to believe, at least at this point in his ministry, that his teaching about God is a kind of reformed Judaism.

The woman, however, is no respecter of the artificial barriers of religion or culture that mean so much to us. She approaches him as one human being to another. She approaches him as a mother who is begging him to heal her child. And what does Jesus do? He tells her to get lost! He dismisses her with an insult! He tells her it is not right to take the food that is meant for the children (the people of Israel) and give this food to the dogs (the Canaanites). In saying this, he essentially describes both the woman and her daughter as dogs.

This was not one of Jesus' shining moments! His exchange with the woman is remarkably devoid of compassion. He sees her through the prejudiced eyes of his people who split the world into two categories: Jewish and non-Jewish, and who look down on everyone who is not Jewish. Jesus believes that this woman and her daughter are beneath him. They are not worthy of his time and effort. To follow up on the theme of our reflections last week, Jesus doesn't *see* either the woman or her daughter.

Though she has just been both insulted and dismissed, the woman doesn't back down! She holds her ground, and, in the course of holding her ground, she challenges Jesus' understanding of his ministry. She challenges him to consider that maybe his understanding of himself and his ministry is too small. She does not deny that she and her daughter are dogs. She simply points out that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.

At this point, I suspect that Jesus was ashamed. If he wasn't ashamed, he should have been! This was no way to respond to this mother's great distress, to this mother's

great love, to this mother's great faith. The woman confronts Jesus, who is both divine and human, with his humanity, with his humanness. She gently holds up a mirror in front of him. She invites him to look in the mirror and, by so doing, forces him to become conscious of his shadow. To his great credit, Jesus quickly pulls himself together; he understands that his callous remarks to the woman evidence a deep misunderstanding of his true call, his true mission. He then is able to respond in a much more loving, much more caring, much more compassionate manner. The daughter is healed. And he and the woman both go away changed through the encounter.

Some commentators suggest that in this encounter Jesus was testing the woman's faith. In response to this interpretation, I say *hogwash!* Jesus was not testing her! He simply blew it! This encounter does not present him in a good light. It was certainly not one of his shining moments!

By the way, I think this may have been why Luke decided to omit the passage. If I were trying to convince people, especially the Jews, that Jesus was the Son of God, as Luke was; if I were trying to sell this new religion, I probably would have excised this passage as well. This makes me even more impressed by the courage of Mark and Matthew who chose to include it. This encounter does not undermine my faith in Jesus. On the contrary, it makes my faith stronger!

The woman shows Jesus that she and her daughter are not beneath him. She helps him to realize that his identity is deeper than his hereditary ethnicity, and that his saving message is not confined to the nation of Israel. From that point on, Jesus begins to think bigger! Shortly after his dialogue with the woman, Jesus tells us a parable about a good Samaritan. The Jewish priest and the Jewish rabbi pass by the wounded man on the other side of the street. The only person who helps this Jewish man who has been beaten within an inch of his life by robbers--is a Samaritan! I think the Syrophenician woman helps Jesus realize that he is not the Messiah, not the King of the Jews, but the Christ, the Incarnation, the Son of the living God. His ministry is not to Israel, but to the whole world!

There has been a difference of opinion in Christian theology concerning when the human Jesus of Nazareth receives the Holy Spirit, when Jesus becomes the Christ. The first option is that it happens at the time of his birth. According to legend, his conception is miraculous; he is born of a God and a human. His birth in a humble stable is attended by a mysterious star and by angels. He is special from the very beginning!

The second option is that Jesus realizes who he is at the time of his baptism. This is when the heavens open up and God blesses him.

A third option is that Jesus realizes who he is and the ministry to which he is called during the forty days in the wilderness following his baptism. As soon as he emerges from the wilderness, Jesus begins to heal people and to teach them about the kingdom of God.

A fourth option, the one we are considering this morning, is that Jesus comes to realize who he is through the Syrophenician woman who comes to him seeking healing for her daughter. In those moments, in their dialogue which, admittedly, does not get off to a very good start, Jesus realizes that, despite what his disciples and the crowds are telling him, he is not the Messiah, the one to lead his people out of bondage to their Roman oppressors. He is the Christ, the Logos or Word of God. He is God made flesh in the Incarnation. And his ministry, his call to people to experience and enter the kingdom of God, is extended to the whole world to the end of time.

I think all four options are true. But because I favor the fourth explanation, I am fascinated by the encounter we heard this morning. I believe this encounter is a profound turning point in Jesus' evolving consciousness of who he is and the message with which he is entrusted. And it came through not only a woman, but through a Syrophenician woman!

So, what is the message of this story for us? It shows us the healing power of love. It shows us the healing power of faith. It shows us the power of intercessory prayer. And it gives us a profound insight into Jesus! It shows us that he was human, that he had a shadow, that even he was not perfect.

It also shows us that his message was not confined to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but to the whole world.

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February 11, 2024*