

*Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.*

A nurse shared the following story with The Reverend Michael Duduit.

“It was a busy morning, approximately 8:30 am, when an elderly gentleman, in his 80’s, arrived to have stitches removed from his thumb. He stated that he was in a hurry as he had an appointment at 9:00 am. I took his vital signs and had him take a seat, knowing it would be over an hour before someone would be able to see him.

“I saw him looking at his watch and decided, since I was not busy with another patient, I would evaluate his wound. On exam, it was well healed, so I talked to one of the doctors, got the needed supplies to remove his sutures and redress his wound.

“While taking care of his wound, we began to engage in conversation. I asked him if he had a doctor’s appointment this morning, as he was in such a hurry. The gentleman told me no, that he needed to go to the nursing home to eat breakfast with his wife. I then inquired as to her health. He told me that she had been there for a while and that she was a victim of Alzheimer Disease.

“As we talked, and I finished dressing his wound, I asked if she would be worried if he was a bit late. He replied that she no longer knew who he was, that she had not recognized him in five years now. I was surprised, and asked him. “And you still go every morning, even though she doesn’t know who you are?” He smiled as he patted my hand and said. “She doesn’t know me, but I still know who she is.”

Today’s reading from the Gospel of Matthew is troubling on many levels. At first glance, it seems to show a side of Jesus that is so un-Jesus-like. Previously, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus heals a paralytic; He feeds five thousand; He heals a leper and a Centurion’s servant; and He reminds us that we are to love our enemies. After reading and hearing these accounts of Jesus’s ministry, what are we to make of Jesus now?

Let us consider the two main characters in this drama. And let us factor in the “time” in which this encounter occurred. Here is a woman who appears in front of Jesus who from the “get go” has three strikes against her. (1) First, she is a woman, an unattended woman and it was not socially correct for an unattended woman to converse with a man; (2) she was a resident of a pagan area, worshippers of Baal; and (3) the Canaanites and Israelites had been enemies prior to the rule of King David. Culturally and socially, she was someone that should be avoided at all cost. But she was not going to be denied. It is as if she was saying to Jesus: “You don’t know who I am, but I know who you are.” And I am here and you are here. So let’s talk.

Jesus ignores her pleas for help. Jesus acts as if she is not even there. His disciples strongly recommend that she must be sent away immediately. And Jesus acknowledges that his mission does not include her but only “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she persists and continues to cry out for help. And in response, Jesus refers to her as being on the same plain as

a dog. And then, the Jesus that we know and love reappears and says to her: “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done as you wish!”

This drama portrays Jesus at a moment in which he is most human. This is an accounting of Jesus in a role that seems foreign to us; it is Jesus as a learner. But as he is in a learning mode He also teaches. These verses are “everyman” because they could just as well be referring all of us. It is a play that many of us have appeared in many times before.

We live in times not much different than Jesus and always have. In the early development of our country, immigrants brought their own unique culture and language and faith and attempted to assimilate into the norms that existed at the time. While most were accepted, many were met with fear and anger and hatred and distrust. As Jesus hesitated in approaching the Canaanite woman, we have problems in our own country reaching out to people who may come from a country that has not been friendly with ours and who practice a religion and a culture that is dissimilar from ours in everyway. But as Jesus learned, so can we.

Jesus mission was to the Israelites and that was his focus. Maybe he was distracted on this day. Maybe he was so focused on his one audience that he missed this woman standing in the wings. We will never know. But what we do know is that he did not keep walking away from her. He looked at her...really looked at her and probably thought something like this. “You know...she is right and I missed it because I was so sidetracked. She taught me something and that is everyone belongs in the Kingdom of God. And now I really know who she is and I really know who I am and what I have to do.”

Reflecting on Matthew 15, The Reverend Barbara Kay Lundblad suggests that “Jesus was converted that day to a larger vision of the commonwealth of God. Jesus saw and heard a fuller revelation of God in the voice and in the face of the Canaanite woman. The woman’s truth is evident in the way Matthew tells the story. At the end of this chapter there is another feeding story. This time four thousand men and women and children are fed and there were seven baskets left over. Seven is the number of wholeness, completeness....the Canaanite woman taught Jesus that she and her daughter deserve more than crumbs. After this encounter, Jesus went on to feed those who had not yet been fed.” And then, she asks the question: “If Jesus could be changed, can we?”

It raises the question of who is our neighbor and who is our enemy. Earlier in Matthew, Jesus says: “You have heard that it was said ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy’. But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you”. It seems that this teaching becomes more and more difficult. With the climate that exists in our country and throughout the world, as it was challenging for Jesus in his time, so it is for us.

The Reverend Christopher Burkett suggests that “the day you can no longer change is the day you stop being a human being. Well, Jesus is a human being, and this day he changes. His outlook, his worldview we might call it now, is lifted to something new. Let Jesus be our exemplar: we must dare to let our outlooks be changed too. We must dare to truly engage with the world and let life’s encounters work with what we know of God and so shape our living and understanding. According to Matthew the gospel writer in this difficult story, that is a Jesus thing to do.”

Can people change? If Jesus did, so can we. Anything less is a cop-out. Cold hearts...hearts formed by evil...can be turned. With the movement of the Holy Spirit and our persistent to exemplify love in the face of hatred I believe that ultimately the light will shine in the darkness.

A prayer offered by the Rev. Cuttino Alexander, let us pray.

God of abundance, we give you thanks for people like the Canaanite woman, for people who rattle us with the truth. Help us to be ever mindful of the voices of others, to those who cry out for mercy. Feed all of us with your grace and bring us to the day when all may gather at your banquet table. We pray in the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever.

Amen