

## JESUS & THE CANAANITE WOMAN

When I first read this morning's gospel lesson earlier this week, the story from Matthew of Jesus and his encounter with the Canaanite woman, my first response to it was sort of blah: here we have a healing story, just like twenty other healing stories which appear throughout the gospels. A woman comes up to Jesus and asks him for help. They have a conversation and the daughter is healed. You see the same pattern repeated over and over again in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But as I thought about it throughout the week, it became clear to me that this healing story was different from others in three important ways: first of all, the woman was not your standard supplicant; second, the conversation she had with Jesus is truly remarkable, not like any other conversation in all of the gospels; and third, the person who ends up most significantly changed by this encounter is not the woman, not even her daughter, but Jesus. Not at all your typical healing story.

I'd like to talk first about the woman for a minute. The story tells us straight out that she is a Canaanite, a worshipper of the god Baal by implication. Now, if you remember your Old Testament history, the Canaanites are the people that the Jews dispossessed when they came to the Promised Land. Throughout the centuries Jews and Canaanites lived side by side in close if not altogether happy relationship. By the time of the first century, Palestinian Jews no longer had a kingdom, but they lived together in a tightly structured community. Though they still lived in physical proximity to Canaanites, the cultural gap between them had widened, and the relationship grown more hostile, to the point where Canaanites probably fit just below Samaritans on the Jew's list of least favored people. This woman I who approached Jesus was a Canaanite, and it is clear that Jesus had absorbed the prejudice of his culture when at her first appeal for help, Jesus does not bother even to respond to her. "Have mercy on me, son of David," she pleads. But Jesus in Matthew's telling "did not answer her a word."

Now Jesus' disciples were obviously embarrassed by this woman trailing around behind them. It was bad enough to be followed by a Canaanite, but a woman alone was even worse. We have to remember that in Jesus' world women did not go out into the streets unescorted; not "decent" women anyway. By the fact that it is this woman who approaches Jesus, and not her husband or some male relative, we can assume about her that she was a woman of ill repute, or a widow with no male relatives to take care of her, or a woman who didn't care if she was perceived as either of the above, a woman who didn't care that Jesus would recognize her as a virtual outcast even among her own people. The disciples did not want someone like that following them around, and so asked Jesus to get rid of her.



So Jesus and the woman embark on this very interesting conversation. He says to her by way of dismissal, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But the woman is not put off. She does not argue with him really, does not try to convince him that she too is a lost sheep or worthy of his attentions. She merely pleads again, "Help me, Sir." And Jesus, obviously angry that she did not get his message, replies, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." Again, the woman does not argue with Jesus' basic contention that she is no better than a dog, but says to him, "Yes, Master, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

There is an overwhelming dignity in the woman's response to Jesus, which springs from her lack of self defense, her absolute lack of apology for herself and who she is. She makes no claims for herself, nor does she say the things that one would imagine an important Jewish rabbi like Jesus might want to hear. She merely declares her right to the crumbs of grace and healing which would otherwise be lost.

Obviously, her presence and her poise make an enormous impression on Jesus, for not only does he heal her daughter, but from that time on Jesus' understanding of himself and his mission is radically changed. Before this encounter, he believed himself sent only to the children of Israel; after this conversation with a nothing Canaanite woman, he preaches to Jews and gentiles alike. In Matthew's gospel, this is the major turning point in Jesus' ministry, brought on by a chance encounter with an unrepentant and unreformed pagan.

The story is abundantly rich in meaning. But this morning, I would like to make only one point about what it says to me. Over the past few weeks, for some reason I have found myself engaged in several discussions on the subject of tolerance, especially religious tolerance. Several of these discussions have been prompted by the furor surrounding the City Council and the human rights ordinance. The others were set off by discussions about the future and preparing for the future, and how we might approach the religious pluralism of our world. They are two totally different frameworks, and yet I would say they are related in that they both deal with how we relate to people who might be judged as significantly "different" from us, whether that difference be the difference between Christianity and Islam, between black and white, between homosexual and heterosexual. And related to that, how do you deal with questions of right and wrong, good and bad? What if you believe that Christianity is the truth and Islam contains only part of the truth? What if you don't know how you feel about homosexuals, or if you are clear that you believe heterosexuality is somehow superior to homosexuality? What does it mean to be tolerant? How tolerant are we supposed to be? In my mind at least there is a connection between these questions and this morning's story about Jesus and the Canaanite woman.



As I understand it, there are three basic positions which can be taken on the subject of tolerance, and most of us probably are not purists, but fall somewhere between on any given issue. First, there is the position of non-tolerance. The position which says, in effect, "I am right and I know I am right, and unless you agree with me, then you are wrong, and because I am right and you are wrong, we are so different that we can have nothing to do with each other." The extreme position on this would go on to say that those who are wrong are a danger to that which is right, and therefore should be gotten rid of if they can't be convinced to see the error of their ways. Utopian communities, totalitarian governments of either the left or right, and religious conservatives, be they Christian, Jewish, Moslem or whatever, tend to hold this position. They are non-compromisers. They are unashamedly intolerant.

At the other end of the spectrum are what I would call the universalist tolerators. Their point is that we should be tolerant of everyone. Their reason for this is a belief that in all cases, the ways in which we as human beings are alike are more important than the ways in which we are different. Universalists tend to be relativists as well. They are uncomfortable making absolute truth claims. They are uncomfortable with others who say that all the world's major religions are equally true and valid, and would urge toleration on the grounds that they all say basically the same thing a lot of the time. We should tolerate and live together peacefully and respectfully with Hindus, and Moslem and Jews, because basically they are people like us with values like ours, and those things which we disagree on or which make us different are less important than those things which bind us together. Liberals of any stripe, be they religious, political, or cultural, tend to be universalist tolerators.

I have always thought that intolerants were difficult to be around and sometimes dangerous, and what bothers me most about them is not the strength or passion of their belief, but their level of assumed inerrancy. I don't mind that Jerry Falwell is as active or as persistent as he is, or even that religious conservatives in Duluth are as passionate as they are at City Council meetings. But I think there is a subtle but important difference between those who say, "This is what I believe, and I believe I'm right," and those who would go further and say, "This is what I believe, and I know I'm right, and you are wrong and you should be punished for that."

To go back to the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, the person who was wrong in that encounter, the person who left with new ideas and a change of heart was not the woman, but Jesus. If Jesus did not consider himself and his theology inerrant, if Jesus, though he believed he was right, was open to argument and to changing his mind, then it is clear to me that lack of tolerance at least for Christians is an unbiblical option. Jesus believed in himself and in his God passionately



and absolutely. He believed he carried The Truth with a capital "T", and yet, underlying that belief was a deeper appreciation for his ability to be wrong, the fact he could learn more, the opportunity that he could change his mind. If Jesus did not trust in his inerrancy, I think it would be presumptuous for Christians to trust in theirs. If Jesus was able to learn and to be changed by an encounter with a pagan woman of low status and/or virtue, then we who would follow Christ should be open to listening and learning from those we consider to be radically different from us, even those whom we think are wrong, even those whose lifestyle we do not agree with.

Which brings me to my second point about Jesus and the woman. I believe the story points up flaws in the point of view of non-tolerance. I also think it points up equally significant flaws in universal, relativistic toleration, toleration based on understood similarity, toleration based on denial of absolute truth claims. I think it is important to see that in the interaction between Jesus and the woman, ideas of universalism and relativism do not enter in at all. The woman never tries to convince Jesus that she is as good as the children of Israel, or that she is a potential convert, that she and Jesus are alike, and by continuing their interaction their likeness will grow. In fact, when Jesus reminds the woman that she is different from him, no better than a dog, she does not dispute that, but argues instead that even in her difference, even though she is sub-human in his estimation, still she is deserving of something. She moves him to respect her, even though neither of them will minimize the ways in which they are different or the importance of that difference. And I think that this is crucially important. The place that Jesus comes to at the end of this story is not the place that Jews and Canaanites are similar and equal, but that, though different in fundamental ways, still both have the capacity to hear him and to learn from him, and to teach him as well. The woman changed Jesus' mind. He did then not shrink from making absolute truth claims; he merely changed the nature of the absolute claims that he was making, and continued as passionately and as openly as ever.

It seems to me that the fallacy behind universalist toleration is that what is important about human beings, and human life, and religious systems, and ways of living is not only the way that they are the same from one to another, but also how they are different. To go back to Jerry Falwell, he and I are similar in many ways. However, what is equally important about us--at least to me and probably to him as well--is the ways in which we are different. Judaism and Christianity are alike in some ways. However, they are fundamentally different in others, and those differences are important, important to Christians, important to Jews. And I think it is a denial of the integrity of both to minimize those differences. I would say the same about any other major system of religious thought and practice. Our differences are at least as important as our similarities, and if we are to live together in true toleration, then we must



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live together not minimizing but acknowledging our differences, and respecting each other even though we are different, even though we think the other is at least partially wrong. We must be allowed to make the absolute truth claims which are important to our faith, and let those who are different make their claims also, acknowledging that we disagree, but respecting each other's integrity as well.

I am reminded of a story about a man named Ezra Stiles, a Congregationalist minister in Connecticut in the 18th century. He drew great attention to himself because every day he and the town rabbi would walk together on the town green. As time passed, they became close friends. One of his congregation asked Stiles how he could spend so much time, subject himself to the influence of one who was not a Christian. Stiles answered, "He is a man of faith. I am a man of faith. We have much to learn from each other. We have great respect for one another. We respect our disagreements. Beyond that, we leave it to God."

Such toleration is difficult. To respect another even when they are different, their values are different, especially when you consider them or their ideas wrong, is harder than a compromising universalist toleration. It is certainly harder than to be intolerant. But we in the Christian Church state as one of our truth claims that we take our rule of practice from the life of one we call Jesus the Christ, who underlying all his claim to the truth never forgot that he could be wrong, a man who was not too proud to have his life changed by a chance encounter with a pagan woman, a Canaanite woman, one who was so different from him in significant ways. If we would follow him, we should emulate his humility and his openness and the harder road of true tolerance which he followed. Amen.

Let us pray for peace in our world, that our fighting may cease and we might learn to live with everyone in mutual respect and integrity.

Let us pray for the Church, this church, the church members, that we may become more faithful servants of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pray for all in any kind of need.

Let us pray for ourselves.

A sermon preached by Elizabeth Oettinger at  
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