

August 24, 2008
The Federated Church of Hyannis
The Reverend Dr. John A. Terry, Pastor

BOTHERING JESUS

Matthew 15:21-28

Now guide me, O Lord, in all the changes and varieties of the world; that in all things that shall happen, I may have an evenness and tranquility of spirit; that my soul may be wholly resigned to your divinest will and pleasure, never murmuring at your gentle chastisements and fatherly correction. Amen. (Jeremy Taylor, 1613-1667, Anglican bishop)

A man was going up to bed when his wife told him he had left the light on in the garden shed. She could see it from the bedroom window. But he said that he had not been in the shed that day. He looked out himself, and saw there were people in the shed, stealing things. He called the police, but they told him that no police were in his area, so no one was available to catch the thieves.

He said “OK,” hung up, counted to 30 and called the police again. He said, “Hello. I just called you a few seconds ago because there were people in my shed. Well, you don’t have to worry about them now. I’ve just shot them all.” And he hung up. Within two minutes half a dozen police cars arrived. They caught the burglars red-handed. One of the policemen said to this man, “I thought you said you’d shot them!” He replied, “I thought you said there was no one available.” Sometimes we have to bother people to get things done.

Jesus and his disciples had gone to the district of Tyre and Sidon, what today is part of Lebanon. This was outside the established boundaries of Israel. This is a region considered unclean to the Jews because the Canaanite people worshiped Phoenician gods. To say this mother was Canaanite meant she was considered as enemy of the Jewish faith.

Further, as a woman she had no legal or social standing. She was considered to be the property of her husband. Her boldness would have been considered shocking. Even today men do not always appreciate assertive women. I heard about one woman in a farming community who went to a

meeting usually dominated by men. They were discussing some important issues critical to farmers.

About midway through the meeting this woman stood up and spoke her piece. One of the old farmers didn't like her intrusion. He jumped to his feet and said, "What does she know about anything. I would like to ask her if she knows how many toes a pig has." As quick as a flash, the woman replied, "Take off your boots, Fred, and count them yourself!" Assertive women are not always appreciated.

And to complicate the situation, recorded in the gospel the woman said her daughter was tormented with a demon. Obviously she has not been able to get help elsewhere. People with mental health needs often get pushed away and shuffled from place to place. She had not come to the right provider. She was in the wrong office. It was not covered by her policy. She did not have coverage in this region. We can't help you. Return to your own district.

Mental illness has a stigma not assigned to physical illness and injury. Last Saturday I became overly ambitious and decided to install a new folding staircase in our attic. The instructions were not too complicated. I had one of our big strong sons there to help do the heavy lifting. But the one thing not included in the instructions for installing a new staircase is how to take out the old staircase.

Given my limited skills and total absence of advanced planning I just tried ripping it out with a crow bar. I was achieving a measure of success when the spring let loose and hit me in the hand. Shortly thereafter my son said, "Dad, you are dripping blood – lots of it." And I was. And in a short time I was given emergency supplies to cover it and later more extensive bandaging.

The wound was obvious. It was care for. Now all I have left are stories and stairs. But with any kind of emotional illness, instead of offers of help you are more likely to be avoided. They placed such a stigma on this girl's condition that it was not referred to as depression or anxiety or a phobia but a demon. She does not simply have an illness. She is possessed with illness. Here is this Canaanite, a women, in the company of a demon possessed daughter. No proper Jewish man would have anything to do with either of them.

Yet she said shouted, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” We are not told how she had heard about Jesus, but evidently his reputation had spread outside of Israel. Somehow she did understand something of the one to whom she spoke, calling Jesus, “Lord, Son of David.”

Maybe you have faced a time of desperately seeking medical attention for a child. When our youngest son was an infant he was a pretty sick little boy. The day we picked him up from the adoption agency we recognized that he was so sick we took him right to our pediatrician’s office and she sent him right to the hospital where he stayed nearly two weeks, one of four major hospitalizations in his first year of life. I remember how I felt during one hospital stay when the doctor said, “He may never get better.”

Fortunately he did and this very sick little boy grew into a healthy adolescent who made all-state in baseball, basketball and football. He just passed the most rigorous physical test given by the Air Force and four weeks from tomorrow he leaves for the Air Force where he is looking forward to jumping out of a plane at 30,000 feet and living in a snow cave and other adventures. But there was a time in his childhood when we were desperate and would have done anything to help him get healthy.

Some people get so desperate for a cure that they even try religion. Is it too harsh to ask: Are you just appealing to the emergency God in moments of desperation only to turn from God when you get what you want? I remember a young father of 3 children who started coming to church after he learned he had cancer. He asked us to pray for him, which we did. In time the doctor pronounced him cancer free.

That was the last we saw of him in church. The last I heard of him he had bought a 10 million dollar home. But I never again saw him in church putting a penny in the plate. Maybe I should have done what Jesus did – tested him to see how earnest he really was in his faith. Were we just another medical service he would use and leave behind? Are you calling Jesus Lord because you want something, or are you calling Jesus Lord because you believe something? The woman believed something. She called Jesus Lord, Son of David.

At first reading, this seems so out of character for Jesus. A desperate woman pleaded for help for her daughter and he said nothing. It is like the story of the church member who stopped by to visit his pastor on a hot summer afternoon and found the minister on his back patio drinking a cold beer. The church member was shocked, and he said so. The pastor replied that he couldn't understand what the problem was. "Jesus drank wine, you know." "Yes, I know," the church member responded, "and I've been ashamed of him ever since."

Jesus first response to the request was to keep silent. This was the Canaanite woman's first test – Jesus' silence. Nothing tests us more than when we think God is absent, when we cannot discern any results from our prayers and pleadings.

Nothing is more likely to make active church members become ex-church members than asking for help and feeling they are being ignored. We have that sense of entitlement that surely those who hear about our needs will have compassion and respond. Perhaps Jesus was testing this woman's faith to see how strong it was, or to help the woman understand how strongly she believed.

As it turns out, this woman had a much better understanding of Jesus than did his own disciples. They thought the right thing to do was to send the woman away. They thought of her as an interference with Jesus' ministry. It turns out she understood the compassionate and healing nature of Jesus better than they did. They thought she was wrong to keep crying out to him. It turns out that bothering Jesus is the right thing to do.

Jesus then tested this woman's understanding of and acceptance of the Jews. The term "lost sheep" characterizes Israel as leaderless and in desperate need. They may be the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but they are still God's sheep and God still seeks them. She acknowledged them as having the first covenant with God. She also knew there is room for all God's people at the table.

This past week I redid my list of projects I want to do at our home. Having checked off folding attic stairs I am now looking at two magic words: build deck. We make plans and put priorities in place. But things happen and our plans change. If it rains that day there is the exciting listing: paint kitchen pantry. I will still build the deck, but circumstances change and priorities

get rearranged. Jesus was sent first to the Jews, but the persistence of this mother changed things.

What changed things was her persistence. There is a virtue in persistence. A father was trying to encourage his son by saying, “Don’t give up, don’t ever give up!” The boy replied, “But, I can’t solve my problem.” His Dad continued, “Son, the people who are remembered are those who didn’t give up: Robert Fulton didn’t give up, Thomas Edison never gave up, Eli Whitney never gave up, and look at Isadore McPringle.” “Who is Isadore McPringle?” asked the boy. “See,” said the father, “you never heard of him because he gave up!”

Maybe you have felt like this woman – begging God for help, pleading your case, willing to break any barrier and cross any line but all you seem to get from God is silence and rejection. She was not going to let silence and the possibility of rejection stop her. She did not get angry and insist that Jews were no better than Canaanites, or demand her rights. Instead she kept bothering Jesus saying, “Lord, help me!” And that is the essence of most of our prayers, “Lord, help me!” And this is a prayer acceptable to God: “Lord, help me!”

Then we hear words that are hard to believe would come from the lips of Jesus. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Jesus spoke these words to the woman and he spoke them in the hearing of his disciples. With the first disciples we are left to wonder why Jesus said that. Jesus was speaking both to a determined woman and to some often bewildered disciples.

There are things we cannot know because all we have are the words and not the tone of the words or the expressions on Jesus’ faces. We don’t know if the encounter was angry or playful. Because Jesus did not answer right away did not mean he would not answer. Because he spoke of God’s priorities for him did not mean she would never be helped. Scholars indicate that the word Jesus used for dog indicates household pet. In my home there is an on going struggle involving feeding dogs from the table. The only real winners in the debate are the dogs.

This mother asked nothing for herself. In fact she took a significant risk. All that she asked she asked for her daughter. Jesus used four words to

describe this woman: “Great is your faith.” He never said this of his disciples but of this woman he said, “Great is your faith.”

Bothering Jesus, it turns out, is the right thing to do. It does not begin as we would expect, but it ends as we believe – with the compassion and inclusion of Christ, helping all who earnestly turn to him.

Forgive us, O God, for thinking we have you all figured out. We pretend we know who is in and who is out of your family. Forgive us and mold us into a community where all your children are accepted, included and loved and served. Amen.