

Lectionary 20A Pr 15  
Grace Lutheran Church  
Lakeland, Florida  
August 16, 2020

Gen 45:1-15  
Psalm 133  
Rom 11:1-2a, 29-32  
Mt. 15: 10-28

Isn't there something basically troublesome about this Gospel lesson.

The Jesus we hear about in this account just doesn't sound like the one we sing about when we sing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus". He doesn't seem like the merciful and kind savior ministering to those who come to him, healing them and feeding them.

What are we to make of this?

Well, in the same way that Jesus was hungry from time to time and probably got a cold or the flu from time to time, so it is that he got tired from time to time. Just before this reading we see that Jesus got word that his cousin John had been murdered, he was in a crowd of perhaps 12,000 including women and children teaching them and healing them, he tried to get away for a spell but headed out walking on water to the disciples in the middle of a storm. He went to a new place hoping to have a bit of a rest. But people recognized him and flocked to him for healing.

Then on came the Pharisees and the scribes for a little chat (a confrontation, actually) with Jesus about rule-breaking – not washing your hands before dinner; then a lecture to the crowd about what it means to be clean or unclean. Then Jesus thinks he's heading away from all the commotion to get a little rest. I dare say he may have been exhausted by this time.

He heads toward the area of the Gentiles and a Canaanite woman comes to him crying out for mercy. The Canaanites and the Jews were long time enemies back to the time when the Israelites had entered Canaan – the "Promised Land" and conquered it. The Canaanites were not Jewish, not Christian – they were pagans. Outsiders.

And one of "them" wanted something from Jesus. She shouted out beseeching his mercy and the healing of her daughter from the demons that possessed her. Here's where it gets interesting. This is the only time in the Gospels that Jesus, when approached by someone in need, does not respond compassionately. Instead, Jesus ignores this woman. Because this response is so very unusual, it is safe to conclude that this lesson is not about Jesus and how kind and compassionate he is with people who come to him. Rather this is about with whom Jesus engages.

Jesus, a Jew; born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, traveled to Jerusalem; a circumcised, Sabbath keeping, Passover observing, Jew. This Jewish Jesus talks with, engages with, responds to a Canaanite, someone who is ritually unclean to an observant Jew. Jesus bucked the culture of his time, bucked what he had grown into as a child, bucked social custom to even acknowledge her presence much less deal kindly with her.

And so, we find Jesus caught in the middle of a shouting match. The woman shouting for mercy on one hand and the disciples on the other urging that Jesus send her away. And then Jesus seems to enter the fray – "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." So, why then is it that they were in this foreign and unclean land? And rather than withdrawing, the woman

kneels before Jesus and simply says, “Lord, help me.” A plaintive request from the depths of her being out of her love for her daughter. Jesus’ response is even more confounding. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Yes, this statement is as harsh as it sounds, with all the connotations one may understand about calling a woman a dog. Yes, harsh. But rather than using that rebuke as a barrier, my friend Jan Richardson notes that the woman uses it as a doorway. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table.”

And, Jesus’ response commends the woman – the unclean Canaanite woman on her knees before him persistently asking for the Lord’s mercy. “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” Great is your faith. Great is your persistence. What a contrast to Jesus’ words to Peter as he was sinking into the sea – “You of little faith.”

Jesus demonstrated in no uncertain terms that, in addition to being there for the people of Israel, he was there for a woman and for a sick child and for a Gentile. Each of these were on the fringe of society at that time. They were unimportant. Were there a census, they simply wouldn’t count. But they did to Jesus, even when he was tired and cranky.

Who is it that is on the fringe of our society here in America? Who are the people who are at the fringe of our community? Indeed, who are the folks within our community of faith who may feel that they are at the fringe? Who are the people that we feel uncomfortable with? Who are the people that we avoid? Who are the people who we think are just hopeless?

Well, Jesus came for them. He didn’t only come for those of us who are cradle Lutherans, those of us who have worked for 40 years and retired, those of us who are in the midst of reasonably profitable careers, those of us who have group health insurance, those of us who can recite Luther’s Small Catechism from memory, those of us married for 30 years with 2.5 children. No, Jesus came for all of God’s children. Not just the chosen ones of Israel – but also for the Gentiles and even the least favored ones of that time.

Jesus is for all. Even for those we don’t like or are afraid of; even for those who speak different languages than we do and make different music than we like; even for those on welfare and food stamps and disability; even for the ignored or forgotten; even for those who have different political views than any of us may hold.

Our Christian faith is not our own peculiar possession – it is offered and given to all because Jesus, God made human, came for all. We recall God’s covenant words to Abraham, “I will bless you so that (two of the most important words in Scripture, here and elsewhere), so that you will be a blessing.”

Because we here at Grace are part of the Body of Christ, we welcome and, indeed, we seek those on the fringe. Our mission is to share God’s love with each other, our community and the world. May it be so. Amen.