

A WOMAN'S FAITH

Matthew 15:21-28 [MW18-28]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai & Wellsford, Sunday 09 September 2018

The gospel we've just heard tells of a risky encounter, a sharp confrontation

- it's one of those provocative gospels that call for all of us to sit around a table and discuss it and what it means to us
it is so rich and challenging
- so what I invite you to do is turn to someone nearby and come up with one word, a "title", or perhaps even a short phrase that this encounter provokes in you

[time for discussion]

- any words or phrases you would like to share ...
(space for sharing)
- the first time I really heard this gospel reading, it made me think of two words: "huh?" and "paradox"
and a possible title: "Jesus changes his mind and his mission"
- however this incident has impacted on you today
allow me to throw out some suggestions ...

"Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David!" the woman cries out

- now, remember, this is a Gentile woman
from a people that is the traditional enemy of the Jews
- she's from the other side of the tracks
she knows it and Jesus knows it
but he has something she needs
- so she startles him by shouting, "You, Son of David"
in effect meaning, "Hey, Jew, how about some mercy?"

The disciples react

- remember they're often the foil in these "Jesus incidents"
something like Watson to Holmes
- so, true to form, they immediately think the problem is with this crude, vulgar woman shouting after them
- but, as usual, the truth is otherwise
the problem is not with the woman ... it's with Jesus

Did you get that? The problem is with Jesus?

- well, yes, you see Jesus' mission is to save Israel
he's a Jew with a mission to his fellow Jews
so he reminds the woman, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"
- and here lies the tension, the standoff, of the story
here are two people on opposite sides of an issue
a hugely important issue

But this woman, a mother, has a hugely important issue too – her daughter

- and she is not at all concerned with tradition, or theology, or calling
she loves her daughter and at her wit's end just wants her daughter to be well
- and she knows, she knows Jesus can do this

So, notice what she does

- she tries a second time
and this second time around, she drops the "Son of David", the Jewish title
- she simply calls him "Lord, or "Sir"
"Help me," she says
- in other words, she drops his particularity and appeals to his universality
she is in effect saying let's forget the boundaries for a moment:
I have a daughter with a deformed body and crooked smile and a dark mind
who will never run and play with other children
- she is hurting so badly
I am hurting so badly
- can't you for once forget our labels?

I imagine Jesus standing with his mouth open, almost lost for words in this instance

- suddenly taken aback, scrambling for a response
and finding himself muttering something about
it not being right to take children's food and toss it to the dogs

Now you have to understand what's behind those words

- you see Jews, unlike the Gentiles, never let dogs inside the house
if you wanted to feed them you had to take the family dinner food
get up, walk over to the window and throw it outside to them
- so Jesus is saying, you want me to do that?
you want me to take inside food, meant for us, for Israel
and walk over and give it to outsiders like you?

Just take a few seconds to let that sink in

- something we take for granted: the universality of Jesus
may just have had its beginning in this encounter ...

To be fair, the woman sees Jesus' point

- but, as a desperate mother, she begs him to have a wider vision than that
surely he can reach further than that, see further than that can't he?
can't he ... ???
- Jesus presses his lips, he pauses
the woman is right, he may be a Jew, but he is also Lord
- finally he says, "Oh woman, you got me there. Great is your faith"
with that "Oh" implying, "I see what you're saying now"

And so the daughter lived

- and the mother lived
and Jesus, who, as Luke tells us in his gospel, grew in wisdom, age, and grace
learned to see his mission as wider than what he first thought
- that's something to think about
that's why when I actually heard this gospel incident and took notice of it
I went "huh?" that's a paradox
does Jesus actually change his mind and his mission???

It is indeed a dramatic and colourful story

- let's go back to the woman, that loud-mouthed, persistent woman

What drove her so?

- what made her cross boundaries?
what fired her passion?
- it was her daughter, of course
she is consumed by her love, by her mission

She is a mother

- her mission is her daughter
her demon-filled daughter is going to die or endure a living death
and if this Jewish messiah can help, then, by God, he's going to!
- little things like nationality and ethnic rivalry are not going to stand in her way
this woman has faith all right, but faith in the need to have things right

Writing about this gospel parish priest and preacher William J. Bausch says:

I can still see this woman today. I can still hear her today. She is every parent who screams at their demon-filled children, "I'm on my way to church but before I go, I want you to know that I'm never going to stop. You think you can sulk and avoid me and I will go away. Let me tell you something. I am never going away and you can never run far enough to get away from me until you change your ways. Now pull yourself together and get some help!"

Yes, this woman of the gospel lives. This woman is a tigress who will humble herself to plead for her child, shout out to God, call him to account, and see that justice is done. She has a fierce faith, an indomitable hope, and a love that won't let up. She is every parent, teacher, mentor, and friend who challenges those they care about and who shouts after God's mercy and help.

That's also something to think about.

So to help with that, let me read this gospel once more, in a rather different version

- and as I read, close your eyes, if you will,
set the scene, put yourself in it, and listen anew

At that time Jesus went into foreign territory, and suddenly out of nowhere a disheveled native woman ran out to him and shouted, "You, Jew, Son of David that you are, have pity on me, for I have a tormented daughter and my heart is breaking!" And she sobbed.

Jesus didn't answer. He just stood there trying to take it all in. His disciples, however, always ready to take charge, told Jesus to tell her to get lost. So Jesus said to the woman, "Sorry, I'm spoken for. I was sent only to the house of Israel?"

She now fell on her knees and said in a softer voice, "Sir, help me, please, if not as a Jew then as a messenger of God's mercy." But he said, holding himself tall, "No, I don't think so. I'm not going to take what belongs to my people and toss it to dogs like you."

A nasty retort was on her lips, but, thinking of her daughter writhing and screaming in agony, she gritted her teeth and only said meekly, "Yes, but even dogs like me will take scraps. Surely you can cross lines when my daughter is hurting so, can't you?" And Jesus sighed as he thought to himself, "She is right. This is my Father's will." Aloud he said, "Oh woman who taught me who I am, your persistent faith in what is right has made both you and your daughter whole. Go in peace."

And she with joyful tears stood up and bowed to him. He with a knowing smile bowed to her. And they departed.

Amen.