

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost
Year A, RCL
August 16, 2020
North Fork Ministries

Gospel:
Matthew 15: 21-28

Jesus left Gennesaret and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

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Most of us who love animals tend to spoil our cats and dogs. Alleluia, Allie I call him now, the scared and skinny Australian Shepherd puppy I adopted from an animal shelter during the first week in Easter almost 10 years ago, rapidly gained 10 pounds on a gourmet diet delivered directly to my front door. And the doggie treats that I fed him were a delectable concoction of quinoa, flaxseed, pumpkin, carrot, rosemary, and green tea extract. I was sometimes tempted, when the crumbs fell from Alleluia's dog bowl, to scoop them up for myself.

Such was not the case in Jesus' day. A dog could count himself lucky if a bit of gristly meat was tossed in his direction at the end of a meal. To be called a dog, as the people of Israel sometimes called their neighbors in the land of Canaan, was far from a compliment. In fact when Jesus said, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," Jesus used a word for dog that had connotations as derisive, when directed at humans, as the word we now commonly use for a female canine. Jesus answered the Canaanite woman's plea for help for her daughter, first with silence, and then in what must be the least compassionate moment in Jesus' ministry - the disciples tell her to go away, (maybe called her nasty). And Jesus informs her that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

If the Canaanite woman had then lowered her head and wearily returned to her ailing daughter, where in the gospel would we have found good news? Where would we be? Almost all of us gathered here, who cannot claim lineage to the house of Israel – where would that leave us?

Instead, the insistent Canaanite woman dropped to her knees, pleaded with Jesus for help, and made a strong case for the “dogs” of the world to receive food from the master’s table. And Jesus, seeing the persistence of her faith, relented, and from a distance healed her daughter.

We can’t be sure that this woman is responsible for Jesus changing his mind about his purpose. It is clear, however, that in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus’ understanding of his mission underwent a remarkable evolution. Early in Matthew Jesus instructed his disciples to “go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans...” But by the end of Matthew’s account we hear the risen Christ commissioning his followers to go and “make disciples of all nations...” As Jesus came to a more complete understanding of the nature of his ministry, as his circle of compassion expanded, a pathway to God was opened for you and for me.

In the days before Interstate Highway 540 was opened, vehicular traffic to the little corner of Northwest Arkansas where I once lived, was limited primarily to old Highway 71.

In those days, poultry processing constituted a larger portion of the economy than it does now. As chicken and turkey trucks raced with their clucking loads up and down the steep hills and around numerous hairpin curves, they frequently overturned, spilling cages of squawking chickens from one side of the road to the next. Even if they didn't spill their loads, the wind created by a truck moving at 60 miles an hour would create a trail of white feathers blown from the flesh of the crowded passengers. In fact, I'm told that at that time, one could get a pretty good measure of the strength of the local economy by simply observing just how white the ditches were alongside old 71.

However not everyone in that corner of the Ozarks had such a cavalier attitude regarding the wellbeing of chickens. There were more than a handful of people in my congregation who were vegetarians because, as they say, "They don't want to eat something with a face." And there was one couple in particular, that made it their practice to retrieve the lucky, but usually badly damaged chickens that manage to escape from the trucks hauling them to their death, and take them home and nurture them back to health. Rescue chickens.

Everyone knows the story of the buffalo, how once 50 million of these magnificent beasts once roamed the American west, existing alongside the Plains Indians, who depended on them for food and shelter and sustenance of all kind. And in return the Indians treated the buffalo with reverence and awe, recognizing their common bond. And the white man came and saw no link between themselves and the buffalo and, in a few short years, almost slaughtered an entire species.

Or perhaps you are familiar with the religious practice of the Jainists of India. Jainists have such a high regard and reverence for all life that they are not just vegetarians, they also avoid eating the roots of plants, eating only seeds and leaves and stems because removing the root usually means killing the plant itself.

And so it is that we human beings have within us the potential for expanding our own circles of compassion, to include not just our family, our friends, people like us, but people whose customs and traditions are very different from our own.

And the circle can even grow to include not just intelligent, reflective self-aware creatures like ourselves, but all manner of sentient beings.

Christ himself learned that he came into being so that all the world might be saved. To be made holy, is to be made whole. And our “wholeness” our “holiness” isn’t just an internal, personal matter. Our holiness is dependent on our recognition that we are meant to be a part of God’s whole creation, not to dominate, destroy and exploit it.

Yet, as I heard the chief rabbi of Great Britain one time say “moral imagination begins with universality and ends with particularity.” We can think about loving everybody and everything, but universal love finds life in the particular.

When I lived in Arkansas, I regularly ran just after daybreak on rugged trails in the Ozark Mountains near my home. Early one Tuesday morning, after a Monday evening storm, I went for a run on the trail that followed Tanyard Creek below a Lake called Windsor.

I know I was the first on the trail that morning, because the spiders working the night shift left me tangled in their sticky webs. On my first loop through the park it was still too dark to notice, but on the second pass I glanced down a side path I don't usually take, unless I am called to visit the 200-year-old Black Oak tree that reigns over all the other trees in the park. A small sign beside the tree noted its age, its tremendous girth, and the scar on the trunk that remains from a logger's failed attempt long ago to bring the old tree down. What the logger failed to accomplish those decades ago, the dry summer, followed by that Monday night's howling wind and steady sheets of rain, managed to achieve. The old, once majestic oak lay sadly on her side, blocking the trail, roots unearthed and reaching skyward, a shattered trunk exposing ancient decay deep within. I'm I was the first to find her that morning after the storm, but I'm sure I wasn't the last to mourn her passing. She was an old friend - fallen on the forest floor.

A thousand years before Christ, the Roman poet Lucretius, wrote of how we as a part of nature, were formed from the same material as all other beings, “We are all sprung from the same celestial seed; all have that same father, from whom our fostering mother earth receives liquid drops of water, and then teeming brings forth all the generations of wild beasts, providing food with which all nourish their bodies and lead a sweet life and beget their offspring.”

We all have within us the potential for the realization of our kinship with all creation. “We are all sprung from the same celestial seed; all have the same father.”