

Matthew 15:10-28 Pastor Bill Uetrict 8/14/11 9 Pentecost

If you read my article in the most recent edition of **The Lutheran**, you will have encountered my childhood memory of watching “Big Time Wrestling” on Channel Nine in Cincinnati, Ohio, a show brought to us by Rink’s Department Store. It was very bad T.V. with especially bad acting. I remember the actors, who not only oversaw the fake wrestling matches but also advertised for Rinks, announcing at the beginning of a match: “Here in this corner is the Shiek; in the other corner is Bobo Brazil.” The wrestling match was set. Now came all of the excitement.

This kind of set up is what I sense is going on in the gospel lesson for today, at least in the latter half of it. In one corner, in Matthew’s depiction, are the disciples, described by New Testament professor James Boyce as “the true blue representatives of the faithful lost sheep of Israel.” They, as Boyce says, are about the business of checking I.D.’s, keeping out the non-pedigreed riffraff. In that corner, these I.D. checkers are yelling: “Get rid of her, send her away; she’s really getting on our nerves with her constant shouting. She’s got a lot of chutzpah! Women don’t speak publicly to me. Only prostitutes do. She’s one of our ancient enemies. Get rid of her!”

And then *in the other corner* is the Canaanite woman. Truthfully, the Canaanites existed 1000 years prior. They were long gone by the time this story was written. But Matthew wants us fully to grasp what an outsider this woman is. The Canaanites were the enemies of the people of Israel when Joshua led them into the Promised Land. So *in the other corner* is a representative of an ancient enemy. And you know the power that ancient enemies have over our psyches. We aren’t sure why we don’t like certain people, but we just know we don’t. Hating them has just been a long-held tradition. And tradition is

hard to contend with. I am sure you are nothing like me, but I recall being asked why I wasn't fond of a particular woman, why I had a bit of a hard heart directed toward her. My response was: "I don't really remember. Something happened sometime." It's hard to get over that "something."

In the other corner is a woman, maybe a questionable woman, certainly a foreign woman, a woman associated with an ancient enemy. The words of this big-time wrestler are markedly different from those of the disciples. While they are crying out, "Get rid of her," she is crying out, "Kyrie Eleison," "Lord, have mercy." While they are trying their best to make sure that the riffraff are kept out, she is seeking the mercy that embraces the broken, the hurting, the needy, maybe even the riffraff. Here in the other corner is a *real* woman with a *real* story searching for a *real* love that will address her *real* pain. Her daughter is sick. Her daughter has been overtaken. She, the story tells us, is tormented by a demon. The mother and the daughter want help.

Now initially, Jesus seems to jump into the corner with his disciples. Jesus isn't at his best today. Some wonder if he didn't wake up on the wrong side of the bed, if all these experiences with all the crowds aren't really wearing him down. When the disciples say to him, "Get rid of her," he says that he doesn't want to have anything to do with her either. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." And she isn't a part of the lost sheep. She isn't a part of the people of Israel. She's a Canaanite. She is a hated enemy. Maybe Jesus is even joining the disciples is saying, "Get rid of her!"

But the woman knows what she knows and knows what she wants. "Lord, help me," she cries out. And hard-hearted Jesus says, "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." He's

using an ethnic slur to describe her. He's calling her a dog. He's saying that the Gentiles aren't supposed to be getting the good stuff that is intended for his own people. Oh, my gosh, Jesus! What is up with you? Has it really been that bad of a day? This isn't what we expect from you.

I don't know for sure what the woman expected from him, but she must have expected more than what he gave. She won't give up. She's got moxie. She's filled with audacity, tenacity. "Yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table," she says. Whoa! In other words, don't write me off. I don't care what you call me. I don't care about your prejudice. What I care about is that I have a need, I have a sick daughter, I am seeking mercy. You can deal with your strange views of me later. I want your help now.

And then Jesus steps out of the ring or maybe better put, joins the woman in her corner. "Woman," he says, "great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." "Great is your faith." In no other portion of Matthew's gospel does Jesus say that a person's faith is "great." He normally describes people as having "little faith." Just last week he said to Peter: "You of little faith." This foreign woman, this woman who has chutzpah is said to have *great* faith. Who would have expected? Apparently, not Jesus! But now he is in her corner. He has been transformed by her, by her faith.

Oh, there is so much that can be said about this marvelous story, including some thoughts on how faith is not a matter of passive wimpiness: Oh, whatever will be will be! I don't deserve anything more. I'll just put up with whatever is my lot, even if I resent it all the time and communicate to everyone as often as I can about how much I resent it. Get over it! That is not what faith is all about, especially as we see it embodied in the life of the Canaanite woman. Faith is much more of a

struggle. Faith is much more audacious. Faith is much more tenacious. Faith realizes that at the heart of life is a compassion that invites us into a living that is a matter of life, not death. Faith boldly seeks the reign of life in our lives.

But that isn't what I want to talk about today, what I want to highlight today! I am struck today by the change that Jesus goes through in our text today. The Canaanite woman changed Jesus' heart. She forced him to deal with the limitations that he was placing on the compassion of God. She opened him up to the extravagant reaches of God's mercy.

Now let me say this. If Jesus needed to be transformed, if the one who is called Son, the one who seems to have a deep connection to the heart of God, needs to be changed, then, if I may be so bold to say, I suspect that we need to be changed; we need to be opened to the expansive mercy of God. The compassion of God, our psalm (67) for today says, includes **all** the nations. Isaiah tells us that the compassion of God includes the foreigners and other outcasts God is getting ready to gather. And Paul says that the compassion of God doesn't write off his own people, the Jews, who at the moment appear to be disobedient. The compassion of our God is expansive, all of our lessons are saying. It is massive. So it's about time that we catch up with God. The little "All are Welcome" theme that we speak around here quite often is not an empty phrase. It is not just something that we say because we generally are nice people, even though we are!! We speak it because this is what we believe about God. God's compassion is massive. It welcomes all. We speak this theme because we are trying to catch up with God!

For some reason we human beings have an odd need to keep the other “other.” I don’t know why, but I suspect that doing so somehow makes us feel better about ourselves. There is *us* and *them*, and thank God, we are not *them*. So we create all kinds of categories of people. There are white and black folks, poor and rich folks, new members and long-time members, gay folks and straight folks, people who own businesses and people who work for business owners, people on the inside and people on the outside, people who run the church and people who sit in the pews. And those categories serve us quite well. “My gosh, we know how people are going to be because they are a part of *them*, after all, *they* who are a part of *that* category always act *this* way!

Meet a transformed Jesus today! Meet one who has been changed by a foreigner? Meet one who has been forced to understand that the compassion of God is much bigger than we ever expected! Maybe the truth about life is not there are us’s and them’s. Maybe we all don’t stand in different corners of the ring. Maybe, just maybe we are all in the same corner—the corner where the Canaanite woman can be found. Maybe, just maybe all of us are in her same position. Maybe, just maybe, all of our lives cry out: “Kyrie eleison!” Lord, have mercy. Lord, help us! Maybe, as Luther says, at the cross of Christ all of us are beggars. All of us stand in the need of the compassion and the love that flow from the bleeding veins of Jesus.

Therefore, since this is true for all of us, **all** are welcome! I dare you to let your heart to be changed to live out the hospitality of our God.