

I have long been a proponent of the Education for Ministry program. Before I began seminary, I was a participant; after I was a trained mentor; and for the second time this fall we will have our own group here at Trinity. EfM, as it is also known, is a four year program of study for lay ministers of the church. Study focuses on the Old and New Testaments, history and theology. Each week we participate in Theological Reflection. Now this takes many forms, but all provide the opportunity to truly engage scripture.

One method has us look at a particular biblical text from the perspective of all the participants in the story. Using today's gospel as an example - one focus would be on the Canaanite woman; another on the disciples, another on Jesus. We would explore what we imagined they might be thinking, their emotions, and their motivations. We might reflect upon how the Canaanite woman felt as an outsider; or what motivated the disciples to urge Jesus to send her away; or how Jesus might have felt as he at first denies her request. It is a useful tool which ultimately leads the reader to understand how the scripture affects his or her daily life.

Because I think it would be a mistake to focus on this gospel passage as a report of an event from which we can make historical inferences about the ministry and person of Jesus; because essentially Matthew tells the story in order to bring to light one of his great themes – that of the transformative power of faith.

Matthew refers to faith many times in his gospel.

- In healing the centurion – “let it be done for you according to your faith.”
- To the woman suffering with hemorrhages - “Take heart, your faith has made you well.”
- The same to the two blind men.
- And to the disciples – “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed you could move mountains.”
- And about healing the daughter of this Canaanite woman – “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

Conversely Jesus refers to lack of faith or little faith a number of times.

- Considering the lilies of the field Jesus refers to those who worry about earthly things as “you of little faith.”
- To the frightened disciples riding in a boat upon a turbulent sea Jesus asks “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?”
- And to Peter who flounders when walking on water, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”
- Again to the disciples whom he has called upon to feed the four thousand, “You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread?”
- Because of lack of faith the disciples failed to cast out demons and Jesus himself was unable to heal in his hometown.

The turning point of today's gospel is not that Jesus appears to change his mind in dealing with the woman, but that the woman, through her words, demonstrates her great faith in Jesus. Like

the other healing stories, the healing of her daughter is the manifestation of this most essential element – faith; faith that is capable of anything; faith that can even move mountains.

In Matthew's gospel it is this faith that plays a critical role in salvation, which is given in full measure to both Jews and Gentiles, insiders and outsiders, alike.

Now, if we want to explore this gospel and its potential impact on our own lives it might be helpful to use the EFM model and think for a moment about the Canaanite woman. Here Matthew uses as an example of victorious faith a Gentile and a woman – doubly an outsider and one whom the disciples only wish to silence. She is not an Israelite, yet her faith allows her to understand Jesus as the Son of David. By acknowledging Jesus as Lord she gives voice to the belief that being an outsider isn't the final word.

If we let it, by considering this woman, Matthew can challenge readers, ancient and modern, who tend not only to consider those of different gender, ethnicity, religion, politics, or sexual orientation as "the other", but also somehow more distant from God and the divine order and plan than their own group. This is a mistake – and decidedly un-Christian.

Today's gospel invites us to place ourselves in the role of the other and to struggle with our own perceptions while opening for us the possibility of transformation. In it we see the fruits of an enduring struggle of faith; and a story that shows us how such a great faith can heal our wounds and move our mountains in our everyday struggles, with life and each other.