

Fully human Jesus

Proper 16, August 23, 2020

Church of the Ascension

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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. Matthew 13:16-20

My breath is always taken away by this story of the Canaanite woman, and the healing of her daughter, and in particular the exchange and the contrasts between the woman and Jesus.

This story is from Matthew's gospel, but all day today I have been contemplating this Canaanite woman and Jesus against the backdrop of the Gospel of Luke. That's the Gospel where an unknown girl becomes the Mother of God. Luke gives us the Good Samaritan and the one leper who returned to give thanks, also a Samaritan, and so many other provocative outsiders, of all sorts and conditions, cultures and genders. By virtue of how Jesus sees them, we are compelled to see the outsider in a new light, and in that light we see that they are also beloved of God.

But here, as we awkwardly look on, it seems we are not only in some other gospel ~ which we are ~ but on some other planet, watching some other Jesus. To be sure the story ends with the miracle, the girl is healed, and healed instantly. We rationalize with relief that here, in the end, is the divine Jesus we know and love. And maybe we also rationalize that the poignant, lopsided, condescending exchange that takes up nearly all of this passage is somehow made right or erased by the miracle that only occupies the last five words.

It may be that you and I need to allow what precedes the miracle to be what it is, to wonder about this Jesus portrayed here. We Christians do say we believe that Jesus was fully divine *and* fully human. But isn't it true that we aren't much interested in the fully human Jesus, or when we glimpse him we don't know what to do with him? Well, here he is, and clearly on a bad day, or in a human moment that is shadowy and impatient and even shaming: "*It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*"

The humanity of Jesus is all the more complex and saddening because there's nothing that indicates that his heart got involved. In so many instances of healing in the gospels, the miracle is ushered in when Jesus is '*moved with compassion,*' when he sees that '*they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*' But here all we get is a dispassionate observation: "*Woman, great is your faith!*"

We might remember this passage as one to return to when we want to be reminded that Jesus was fully human. Or we may want to read it through again and bring it into our own culture wars and ask, “*Who are the Canaanite women in my world, those I mostly make invisible or treat with contempt so that I can feel better about ‘my people, my education or politics or skin color or religious dialect?’*” Or we may wish to keep an eye out in the coming week for that moment when our hearts should get in the story, the relationship, the moment, but we use some detached observation to keep our distance.

Finally, I wonder if, at any later point, Jesus ever felt regret about this moment. Did he ever think to himself, “*Before I go up on the Mount of Transfiguration and then leave Galilee to do what I will do in Jerusalem, I really should go find that Canaanite woman and her daughter. I’m sure she is grateful that her daughter was healed, but I’m sure she remembers as well that remark about throwing food to the dogs. I wonder if or how I would make amends.*”

We all have had our Canaanite woman moments. Or perhaps there are some of us who have been the Canaanite woman. Where in these moments and in our narrowing, sorrowful habits of seeing and responding may there be opportunities for amends?