

Noisy Faith based on Matthew 15:21-28
Preached by Rev. Adrienne Carr on May 13, 2012
First Congregational Church, UCC Burlington VT.

Happy Mother's Day to all those who ever lost about a year's sleep; worried over every fever, changed messy diapers, realized that learning to walk and talk are mixed blessings and all too soon wrote checks for college tuition payments while still losing sleep.

I have a story to tell you this morning. You have already been introduced to it in Matthew's Gospel. This is a story of a mother of such faithfulness that she wore down the hesitation of Jesus Christ, himself. Because of this story, the sermon is less a celebration of motherhood and more, recognition of the power of love and faithfulness that overcomes seemingly insurmountable barriers.

The Matthew story begins as Jesus and his followers draw near to a Gentile area on the Mediterranean coast in what is today Lebanon. The people who lived in the area are the ancestors of the Palestinian people of today. As Matthew's readers would know, there was no love lost between the Jews and the Canaanites. This attitude was reflected in the encounter the disciples and Jesus had with a Canaanite woman. From the graphic description we can almost picture what the disciples heard and felt and said. As the woman followed in their wake screaming and crying for help, they yelled back and tried to shoo her away. They were in Gentile territory and uncomfortable if not fearful of being there. This crying woman was drawing attention to them with her pleading words to Jesus. "Help my daughter. Heal my daughter. Save my daughter," she loudly begged Jesus. The fearful disciples responded in their own yells, hoping to move the woman into discouragement and retreat.

Now, if you will, imagine the feelings of that Canaanite woman. Centuries of antipathy toward Jews were bred into her; just as the opposite had been bred into the disciples. However, even there in Gentile territory, she had heard of Jesus' miracles of healing. Would this Jewish Holy man be the source of a cure for her daughter? She put her antipathy aside and determined that she would not take no for an answer because her daughter was suffering.

What was the daughter suffering? Until fairly recently in human existence, any physical issue such as epilepsy or paralysis or mental illness was so much a mystery that it was classified as demonic possession. It did not matter to that woman what it was called; her daughter's pain was her pain. That's what parents do, don't they. They suffer every ache, fever, fear or disappointment with their child. And in thrall to the suffering of her daughter, that woman cried and yelled out her absolute faith in him who should be enemy.

The story now becomes troubling to us. Nowhere else has Jesus turned his back on those who suffer. He has healed lepers, brought movement back to crippled limbs, fed hungry people and embraced the poor and marginalized. Jesus has even responded to the plea of a Roman officer – one of those who occupy his country, on

behalf of the officer's slave. Why now does he ignore the plea of the woman whose only fault is that she was born across an invisible barrier?

And what about those paragons of virtue, the disciples? In this passage, the disciples sound to me like arrogant spokespersons for extreme fundamentalist theology. In their reaction to her cry, I hear no compassion; only judgment. She is a pagan. She is a woman. Her beliefs and her cultural norms are abhorrent to true believers. She should be cast aside and sent to the out darkness. They, quite frankly, demand that Jesus turn her away. She is disturbing their Godliness.

And what about the response of Jesus to the woman? Scholars continue to struggle with his initial rejection of her request. Like the disciples, Jesus was raised in a Jewish worldview. So, why are they in Gentile territory? Unlike Samaria, which is on the way from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus had to purposely choose to travel to the shores of the Mediterranean so there is mystery in this passage that is unanswerable.

Life is like that, don't you agree. It happens to me. I am driving a familiar route but suddenly have a whim to see what another road is like. Sometimes I find unexpected surprises that make the whim worthwhile. Sometimes, I just get lost. As that familiar Robert Frost poem, *The Road Less Traveled*, reminds us, there is something in us that wants to experience another route if only for the sake of curiosity. Perhaps Jesus wanted to dip his feet in the Mediterranean or take in the sights of Sidon. This may be one of the most human moments of Jesus that is recorded in scripture. If so, how wonderful.

And what did he expect to find in a Gentile city? Gentiles! Many of the residents of the area had heard of Jesus and some may have recognized him as he wandered the streets. One of those who noticed him was our anonymous mother of a critically sick child whose heart suddenly filled with hope. Whatever brought Jesus into the area is nothing compared to his uncharacteristic behavior with that nameless woman. Jesus ignored her until he couldn't ignore his disciples. When he could no longer avoid her, he turned back to them. Speaking both to his disciples and to the woman or perhaps only muttering to himself, Jesus speaks. It is almost as though he says aloud what he is struggling with in his mind and heart. He says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." The written word does not convey his tone of voice. Is he brusque? Is he regretful? Or, is he unsure of what he should do? Again, how incredibly human any of those responses are. I have used all of those tones of voice. Some that I have used, I am not proud of. Perhaps it is helpful to us to consider in those moments when we are less than charitable, that Jesus could also have been brusque or regretful in responding to another person. What is most helpful to me, though, is that reading between the lines, I see a possibility that Jesus was unsure of how to respond to the woman.

Being unsure about responding to a request that might be a 'no,' gives pause for reflection, doesn't it. In that time of reflection we can step back and consider alternatives. We can ask ourselves if a response made in impatience or unwillingness to 'get involved' is something that is decided on the bases of convenience. Will my decision inconvenience me; if so, do I make a decision based solely on convenience? Or, will the answer that I give be hurtful or helpful to the other and to me? I ask myself how much cold logic and how much warm emotion

influences my decision? Will what I say affect the relationship I have with the other, strengthening or weakening those bonds of care, even if what I say is 'no'? There are times when being unsure is a gift.

No matter the inflection in the voice of Jesus, what we hear so clearly through the printed words is the insistent voice of a woman who will batter down all the barriers for her child. "Lord. Help me." Jesus clearly hears the emotion in those words and responds almost in a continuation of his own internal argument as well as his own learned prejudice. "It is not fair to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs," he says to her. There is no other way to put it. These words are an insult, a slap in the face to the woman. But she will not allow herself to be intimidated by Jesus' jarring statement. She has a child who needs the power of Jesus and no insult to her religion or culture will stop her. She has no time to feel hurt. She has no sense of wounded pride. She has only her belief that Jesus can heal her daughter. And she courageously argues back, softening his words, possibly to remind him of all that she has heard of his innate compassion. And her reply is meant to move Jesus: "Yes, Lord, yet even the 'puppies' eat the crumbs that fall from their Master's table."

With her gentle confrontation, the woman has called Jesus back to that compassion. With her intense albeit noisy faith, she has proven herself worthy of obtaining her heart's desire. Jesus now proclaims to her and to the shocked disciples that she has great faith and he follows the proclamation with the words, "Let it be done for you as you wish." "And," Matthew writes, "in that instant, the daughter was healed."

On this Mother's Day, what can we learn from this story about a nameless mother, rude disciples and a seemingly uncaring Master? What can we learn about closed minds and uncaring attitudes? Above all what can we learn about the power of love which energizes such stubborn faith that barriers crack and fall?

May we take this nameless woman as a model of courage against all odds. May she be to us, a model of profound and unshakeable faith. May the love that gave her the strength to withstand insult and disrespect be a model for all of us to use in all those times and places where words wound and actions cause pain.

That's what mothers do, after all. They send us into adulthood with whatever lessons we have absorbed. And they send us forth with love. Amen,