

Proper 15YA 2023
Matthew 15 Canaanite Woman

A Question of Faith
By the Rev. Salying Wong

So, Jesus, what kind of God are we talking about here?

Today, we hear from an outsider a question of faith. The question she asks is implicit and it is, “So, Jesus, what kind of God are we talking about here?” This question is asked by a Canaanite woman, an outsider of Jesus’ religion and an outsider of the religio-political power structure of the day. She asks this as someone living in a land occupied by Jesus’ people. What does an outsider have to teach Jesus? What do outsiders have to teach us?

The Canaanite woman’s daughter is sick. She’s heard about Jesus’ healing ability. She begs for his mercy. How many of you were surprised, maybe a little embarrassed that Jesus denied her at first, saying, “I was only sent to the house of Israel?” “What’s going on here?” We might ask. The woman, in her own way, says the same thing, “Oh come on, Jesus! You’ve got more to give than that!” Our Canaanite woman probably heard of the feeding of the 5000. That’s 5000 men, as the scriptures say, “besides women and children”. That “besides” is the key. Who else was there besides the men? 5000 women? 10,000 children; 20,000 children? Maybe even the animals got fed that day. Not taking no for an answer, the woman fights back, “Come on, Jesus, you’ve got a little more grace up your sleeve!”

This woman knows what kind of God is the God of Jesus. His God has a lot more up the sleeve. A lot more. Grace for everyone. Here, it takes an

outsider—the one normally excluded from privilege—to make everyone see what kind of God we’re talking about here.

Speaking of seeing, prior to this scene with the Canaanite woman, Jesus just gave a little sermon on spiritual blindness to the insiders. He and the Pharisees argued about the necessity to ritually wash hands before eating. The Pharisees were obeying the recommendations of the CDC and the tradition of the elders. But Jesus had beef with them for making the practice a requirement for spiritual purity. He accused them of making their religion of liberation into a religion of burden. They know the law inside and out, but they do not know the God of the law. He called them a bunch of blind men leading one another into a pit.

As if to illustrate the limits of an insiders’ conversation, Matthew follows this argument between the consummate religious Jews with an interfaith dialogue with a woman whose land is occupied by them. The Canaanite woman pushes for a grander view of God.

This scene in our scriptures poses problems for us; it doesn’t put Jesus in the best light. Some have asked these questions: Is Jesus testing the woman; is Jesus as blind as the rest; did the early writers like Matthew not need Jesus to be sinless the way our creeds would claim? None of these questions can be answered to satisfaction. What we do know is that this scene between the Canaanite woman and Jesus accelerates the movement of grace. What we do know is that her challenge was not in good form or in good order, and yet Jesus called her challenge, “faith”.

This is a very different kind of faith than what many of us have been taught growing up. It is different from the idea of faith as believing what someone in authority tells us to believe or faith as some sanguine charm against things we fear will happen to us. This faith that the Canaanite woman has is such a deep conviction of God’s grace that she’s unwilling to be satisfied with the status quo, unwilling to take authority’s word for it. She will have God for herself.

This story makes me ask two things for us consummate religious folk to meditate on. Do we listen well to the outsider's voice that challenges our limited understandings of God? I know for some people, they don't like seeing Jesus apparently make a mistake today. But, for me, this makes me think Jesus is setting us an example of being willing to be challenged to listen to someone who is outside our privilege and see faith coming toward us that will expand our view of God. It is so easy to dismiss an outsider's voice. Who might you listen to today that you've not listened to before?

The second question is when has your faith made you challenge the going ons to accelerate love in this world? Does faith primarily serve as a comfort blanket for you? Can it also be a burning love, an energy that propels you to step outside of your comfort for the sake of love?

I leave you with these questions to ponder.

Let us pray:

Increase our sight, not for more of the same.

Increase our sight, so to see you where we have not seen you.

Increase our faith, not our belief.

Increase our faith, so to accelerate your love for all the world.