St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church

15th Sunday after Pentecost

[Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp18_RCL.html#ot1)[Psalm 125](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp18_RCL.html#ps1)[James 2:1-10, [11-13], 14-17](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp18_RCL.html#nt1)[Mark 7:24-37](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp18_RCL.html#gsp1)

LESSONS LEARNED

Jesus is tired. He has been trying to get away with his disciples for sometime, but it is not to be. The crowds just keep coming and coming, they follow him wherever he goes. Wouldn’t you? And so he just keeps ministering to them, hearing their prayers, healing their hearts, minds souls and bodies. He has had his moments of confrontation with the authorities, and yet, he keeps on keeping on. And now, here comes this Syrophoenician woman, whose just as tired as he is, for different reasons. She has been trying desperately to find healing for her demon-possessed daughter and she, too, has come to Jesus. We expect, as does she, that Jesus will be compassionate, understanding, see her point of view immediately, take pity on her and send her on her way with a promise of healing for her child. Her faith alone would suffice.

But no. We are shocked at what actually took place. This is Jesus in his full blown humanity, speaking shockingly like you or I when, one could say, we’ve had enough. Instead of the divine understanding and compassion we have become so accustomed to, we get this nasty, snarky human Jesus.

It would be arrogant of me to try to explain why. For hundreds of years, and in countless books and articles, scholars have tried to penetrate the meaning behind this passage, and why Mark felt the need to include it in his Gospel at all.

Some scholars believe that Jesus was just testing the woman’s faith, and some say Jesus was just feeling entitled to his male privileges of the day (note: Jesus was a young man of 30-something!) Other scholarship suggests that Jesus did not yet really understand the breadth of meaning of his inistry. Up until now he was ministering to the children of Israel, meaning the people out of the line of Jacob. Here the woman, some suggest, was providing Jesus with insight in the true scope of his ministry, that is to all God’s children, from every tribe and nation, even a Syrophoenician woman.

The real truth probably lies in tradition and culture. While we find this response from Jesus to the woman reprehensible, people in Jesus’ day would have thought his response was perfectly ordinary and, in fact, to be expected. For a woman to approach a male stranger and actually speaking to them would have been the reprehensible action. Especially a Gentile woman. They were thought to be unclean. There wasn’t a man there who would have even looked at the woman, let alone spoken to her, especially a rabbi! There are rules like that even today, here in the U.S. among Orthodox Rabbinic Law and certainly in the Middle East.

But Jesus did speak to her, which was a probably surprise to most who saw and heard him. The repartee that follows, is reminiscent of the Samarian woman at the well, another woman outside of Jesus’ tradition with the courage to, not only speak her mind, but to parry words with this Rabbi Jesus and to be enlightened because of the conversation, and to serve as one who enlightens Jesus.

Jesus says, “Let the children be fed first,” whereupon the woman comes right back by reminding Jesus that when the children are fed, there are still some crumbs left for the dogs.

I believe, that in his humanity, Jesus suddenly realizes the full impact of her words and their effect on the scope of his ministry. He also realizes his own shortcomings, his need be less hasty in his remarks, and his need to rest. The woman has provided a moment of transformation for Jesus and she has done it by turning the tables on Jesus, thereby teaching him his own lesson. She doesn’t back away at his first sharp words to her, she listens to him and comes back at him, turning his argument upside down. For once, someone else, a Gentile woman of no account in ithe grand scheme of society, has taught Jesus just as he teaches the Pharisees and authorities who try to trick him.

Unlike the authorities with whom he has to parry words, Jesus understands, learns form the exchange, and sends the woman on her way home to a healed child.

You could say that this is a pivotal point within Jesus’ story. Jesus suddenly gains new insight into who he is and the new scope of his call to ministry. No longer just a rabbi, teacher and healer to his own people, through her actions, the woman pointed the way to his ministry in the world. A world of God’s love that included people like her…the outsiders, the maligned, the ignored and forgotten.

It doesn’t take much for us to ignore and forget those we deem as “other” than ourselves. Perhaps they are in need or help or simply in need of understanding. We tend to veer away from people we don’t understand, and we create boundaries around the degree of help we think we are able to offer. We never really take time to get to know them. It may be that they are just as self-sufficient as the rest of us, but are hard to understand due to language or culture. So we tend to judge irrationally about the degree to which people actually deserve our help and those who don’t. We forget words like kindness, compassion or even interest and attention!

So we brush all these conflicting unconscious thoughts under our mental and emotional rugs, so that we don’t have to confront them or ourselves and we grow indifferent or, at least, complacent, in how well we treat our unfamiliar neighbors, who are so very different from ourselves.

The lesson we learned from Jesus today, is that when he was confronted by one who was deemed unapproachable his own tradition and culture, he was anything but complacent. He moved into the situation, stayed open to the conversation and he learned from it. It was not a learning he filed away for the future. It was a learning that he put into practice in the moment and from that moment on all were welcome to approach. Jesus saw God’s message through his encounter with a woman he would never expected to meet when he arose that morning.

After his encounter with her, Jesus does not go back to his own people, he carries on into Greece where he encounters a deaf man, and then there is a feeding of thousands of Gentiles, miracles upon miracles in the world at large.

We give thanks to Jesus and to the Syrophoenician woman for this lesson learned and for this turning point in Jesus’ life.

No matter who we are, where we are from, who or what we believe ourselves to be, we are all the Children of God. We are none of us exempt from God’s love and mercy and each of us can find strength and sustenance in God’s presence to us, no matter how tired, sick, poor or other we may be. The Good News is that we are, each one of us, God’s beloved. And, because we are, we are able to eat the Bread of Life which is rich, full and abundant life-giving meal from which we are never turned away. Alleluia!

Amen

Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

September 5, 2021

BIBLE STUDY

The reading from Proverbs tells us that we have a common heritage in the Lord. The reading describes the behavior and attitude we are called to exhibit towards one another. This attitude is also expressed in our Baptismal Covenant, as we commit to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving [our] neighbor as [ourselves]” (BCP, p. 305). The proverb warns us not to sow injustice but to be generous and share our bread with those without bread. The Baptismal Covenant calls us to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being” (BCP, p. 305).

* Does this theme of justice and respect for others appear in other passages of the Hebrew scriptures?
* What actions do we take personally and as a community of faith to live out this common heritage as described in the Baptismal Covenant?

Psalm 125 expands on the theme of justice expressed in the Proverbs reading. The psalmist suggests that the happy (or blessed) person places trust in the Lord as creator of heaven and earth. The Lord is the source of justice and invites those who claim him as Lord to be agents of justice and to care for the poor, the stranger, the orphaned, and the widowed.

* How do you understand the meaning of happy or blessed?
* Who is the stranger in your community?

**James 2: 1-10, (11-13), 14-17**

The epistle reading goes to the heart of the behavior of the community. It seems that there is a problem with the rich being welcomed and treated favorably at the assembly while the poor are not as welcome. James tells them that they are making “distinctions” damaging to the faith community. The reading echoes Jesus’ teaching and that of the Torah: to love God and your neighbor as yourself. The reading today ends with James advising the community that to be a credible witness, they need to express faith in action.

* Do you agree with James that we are to be a welcoming community?
* IN WHAT WAY? WITH WHOM? (Strangers, homeless, hungry, Russian tenants, Liberian tenants, Sandy River tenants)