A House of Prayer for All People

The 13th Sunday after Pentecost, August 14, 2005

Isaiah 56:1-7 Psalm 67 Romans 11:13-15,29-32 Matthew 15:21-28

For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. (Isaiah 56:7)

Jesus and the women and men who were his disciples have escaped the pressure of Judea and Israel. They have left the crowd of 5000 behind them, traveled through Gennesaret, into Tyre and Sidon.

But as soon as they think that have safely made their strategic retreat, a strange, foreign woman comes running out of her house, screaming! She is weeping and yelling and generally acting in a way Emily Post would disapprove of.

She is full of a grief which is loud and painful to hear, the kind of grief people shuffle away from. The grief people try not to hear from mothers like Cindy Sheehan and mothers in Iraq, from Palestinian and Jewish mothers, wailing over the destruction of their children, the grief in southern Africa of the grandparents of AIDS orphans, The cry of a parent afraid for the life of a child.

"Send her away," the disciples say to Jesus, "for she keeps shouting after us." As if Jesus couldn't hear this loud foreign woman. A Canaanite – a foreigner, a gentile, an outsider, an Arab – and not a rich man, but a poor woman.

And Jesus – Jesus who, in Matthew's gospel, had just been teaching his disciples that it is the words coming out of your mouth which can defile a person – Jesus calls her a dog.

Some commentators bend over backwards to justify this awkward moment. They point out that Jesus uses the diminutive of dog, *kunariois*, doggy as if that softened the insult. This excuse for Jesus breaks down if you translate the passage in English into gender-specific language for dogs, a word not softened by prefacing it with "little."

I'd like to propose two theories about Jesus' behavior. You can pick one, both, or neither…

The first is the "Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle" theory. Have any of you read the books by Betty MacDonald about Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle? My sister loved these books – as did I.

Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle lives in a sprawling, upside-down house in a residential suburb not unlike Newton. Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle has a great knack for helping difficult children – children who are greedy and won't share, twins who are violent rivals, children who are terrible snobs or picky eaters.

Her approach is to accept the children for who they are, and then encourage their behavior to such extremes that the kids finally notice what brats they've been. There is the "Selfishness Cure" for a very possessive child, for example: Rather than forcing the child to share, Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle has the parents label *everything* the child owns, until he is so mortified by his own selfishness that he learns to share.

So perhaps Jesus is being a Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle, holding a mirror up to the disciples' own behavior. He hears the disciples say "Send her away. She's loud and she's bothering us…" and Jesus takes their prejudice and discomfort to its logical extreme. Instead of being the foolishly kind and understanding rabbi that they know, he turns around and calls this woman a dog, and threatens to leave her daughter to suffering and torment.

It is one thing to despise someone silently, to indulge the racist voice in the back of one's head. It is another thing to hear that ugliness expressed out loud to a real human being.

And Jesus chose his foil well: The Canaanite woman has the perfect come-back line, that clever, ironically self-effacing sentence: Even the dogs get the crumbs from under the children's table. God's table is for everyone –

© 2005, The Rev. Devin McLachlan.

the lesson Isaiah gave voice to when writing "My house of prayer will be a house for all peoples"

Or perhaps, as my friend Calvin Sanborn told me, this is a story about Jesus' perfection, Jesus who was perfect God and perfect human. Jesus, Calvin argues, was so perfect that he could learn and change his mind. Jesus is perfect because he is able to learn and adapt and grow.

Perhaps Jesus was cranky and tired and worn out, and this screaming dark-skinned woman was too much for him. "Look, I can't help you – that's not my department. I'm a Jewish healer for Jewish people. Go talk to one of your pagan priests. And for God's sake, stop shouting like a stray dog!"

But in the end, Jesus is so perfect that he was willing to learn from this woman. Perhaps the Canaanite woman was the Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle in this story, holding a mirror to Jesus' racism. The Canaanite woman turned Jesus heart, and Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith!"

Two-thousand years later, the Canaanite woman is still yelling at the Disciples, and Jesus is still struggling to listen to her above the scoffing of the world and the discomfort of the church.

Here's the story that opened up my eyes about what it can be like to visit a new church: A friend of mine, lets call him Andrew, grew up in Massachusetts. Andrew is Latino, with curly black hair and olive skin. One Sunday, he tried to go to an Episcopal church in Fall River. The woman at the door, handing out the bulletins, had none of Bev's grace. She takes one look at Andrew and says, with a smile: "Are you sure you're at the right church?"

Maybe she thought she was being friendly. Perhaps she was thinking: "Oh this young man looks Brazilian. So he must think we're one of the Roman Catholic churches. I better let him know before he gets embarrassed about being in the wrong church."

It's a true story, and it's a Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle story: This is what it sounds like when we divide the world into wheat and weeds; this is what it sounds like when we feel that we don't have enough to share; this is what it sounds like when we turn the stranger away from the door.

The danger is in acting like the disciples in Mathew's story: Insiders who were certainly excited about their faith, but also cranky and uninterested in sharing the abundance of God's love with the outsiders around them. What happens when they are wailing outside the door? What happens when we meet them on the bus or at work or in our families?

I believe Messiah is a community working hard to listen, welcome and heal. You can feel that intention and love-in-action during the prayers of the people, during the peace, around the altar table, at coffee hour. We'll see it at work through events like the party on September 18th, offering our neighbors fun and free music out of sheer generosity.

We're doing so much right, sharing the abundance of God's table. Perhaps because almost all of us were strangers at Messiah once. I know Bob Bancroft has been coming to this church since he was three. Many of us here, though, started off in other churches, and through the invitation of a friend found ourselves at Messiah.

Some of us, like me, spent years away from the church. And whether we've been here for six weeks or almost six decades, we all found a home for our faith, for our joy and grief and curiosity and song. A community in Christ, willing to welcome us in to be ourselves in worship and prayer and fellowship.

We are an eclectic group, and I think we are hungry to become more eclectic, opening up our spiritual home to the strangers we meet, making room at the table for those who are hungry, making room at the table for those who will not walk through these doors unless we invite them, making room at the table for those who may never come inside, but who we bring to this table in our hearts and prayers, making room at the table for *everyone*.

For my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

© 2005, Devin McLachlan.