

## Beyond the barriers

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert B. Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on August 17, 2008, the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost.

*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 15:28

For much of his ministry, Jesus dealt with issues regarding differences over practices of ritual purity. In our gospel story today, Jesus and his friends are somewhere between the cities of Tyre and Sidon on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. He and his companions are seeking a brief but much needed respite from his detractors who were relentless in their constant accusations against him. One of the issues in contention is over their perceived exclusivity of the Jewish faith. Jesus is preaching that all of us are God's people with no regard to institutional membership or tradition of ritual practices. There have always been some religious people who don't like that. They like the feeling of being among the elite, the special people of God. I've known people claim that Jesus was wrong and that some people should be excluded. Whenever someone laments over hypocrites in the church, I am tempted to remind them that there's always room for one more!

In the gospel story today, a Gentile woman from Canaan emerges from the crowd pleading for her tormented daughter to be healed. The daughter is afflicted with what was then called demon possession, a condition that today would be diagnosed as an emotional disorder that could be treated with competent therapy and sensitive pastoral care.

The surprising feature in this story is that Jesus at first ignores her plea. This seems out of character with his compassionate nature. As if this isn't difficult enough to reconcile with the Jesus that we know, he then tells her that he came only to save only the lost sheep of the house of Israel, the Jewish people. This seems odd indeed. What's going on here? If this were the Olympics of sarcasm, he deserves at least a bronze medal for that.

What Jesus is doing is testing her resolve. When she kneels before him and persists in her plea for her daughter to be healed, he then says that it wouldn't be fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs, a reference to the tradition that Jews are God's chosen people. Let's give him a silver medal for that remark!

Jesus knows that the Jewish people are chosen by God, but he also knows that they are to be the channel through which all of humanity is to be saved. Jesus is clearly testing the Canaanite woman's faith to see if she believes this is true.

The centerpiece of this story is her quick-witted response. She says that even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table, an audacious comeback to such a facetious remark! Here is a mother so determined and so strong in her faith that she is able keep her wits about her. Jesus sees that she meets the test and her daughter is healed. She went for the gold and won!

Jesus' facetiousness may appear rude and insensitive, but it's his way of testing her faith and resolve. Canaanites were Gentiles known for their worship of false gods and idols. The reference to dogs is a play on words because Gentiles were traditionally thought of as innocent young puppies grabbing up the spiritual crumbs that fall from the master's table. The firmness of her faith cuts through differences of religious tradition. She so firmly believes that God will heal her daughter that she is willing to go to any length and endure any testing. Her quick-witted

retort reveals her conviction that God's healing power transcends all barriers of religious tradition and practice. She has far more than a few crumbs of faith and that is proof enough for Jesus.

Deep-seated prejudice and religious intolerance was behind so much of conflict in the world then as it is today. Many people feel that religion is the source of so much conflict in the world today. An atheist once wrote that whatever else people may think of them they don't fly airplanes into buildings! What motivates terrorists today is not true religious faith but the distorted and twisted misuse of religious tradition.

The God who created us is the same God who offers redemption to all. Each and every one of us has the same needs for healing, reconciliation and understanding. External differences in race, nationality, gender or history must not be used to exclude anyone. We are fortunate that God is greater than our capacity to cast judgment the worthiness of others. We all have a place at God's table to partake of far more than spiritual crumbs that fall to the floor. If the gospel is good news for you and me, it is good news for everyone. And if God's compassionate love isn't for everyone, it isn't for anyone.

From time to time people inquire if we are an open and affirming congregation and my response is that we believe what the sign outside says. "The Episcopal Church welcomes you" means everyone. Jesus said that anyone who believes in him will not be turned away. What is required is that you love God with all your heart soul and mind and love and respect your neighbor as yourself. This is the spirit that defines who we are as Christians.

This story of the woman who sought help in healing her daughter is an inspiration in tenacity. We must never be too proud to ask for help. You won't find anywhere in the Bible that God helps those who help themselves. That is from Ben Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*. The first step in being able to help yourself is being willing to accept help from others.

The future of the human race depends on breaking out of the confines of the boundaries that separate us. We are all in this together and we have all the same needs and concerns. God makes no distinction with regard to divisions between rich and poor, educated and uneducated, faithful and the not-so-faithful. It is only by God's grace that we keep any promise, accomplish any task or overcome any obstacle in our lives.

We are primarily members of the human race before we claim any other racial, religious or ethnic identity. All of us have the same human needs and all of us deserve the same understanding and compassion from God who breaks down the barriers of intolerance and bigotry. The danger is when the oppressed minority becomes the oppressive majority. That is something we all have to be on guard against to save ourselves from the blasphemy of prejudice and violence committed in God's name. Pray always that we are saved from being victims of our own oppression.