

Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost  
August 16, 2020 Yr A  
St. Michael's Episcopal Church  
The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath  
Matthew 15: 21-28

When I was looking for a place to go on retreat, I must have made about 10 calls to retreat centers in the Northeast. Many, of course, were not open because of the pandemic, while others were already full up due to retreat centers limiting the number of guests. I had finally found one and reserved a few days, only to have that retreat center call me a few days later telling me that they had to cancel my reservation because their retreat house had suffered damage during the tropical storm that came up our way a few weeks ago. Finally, I wrote to the Society of St. Margaret retreat house checking if they had any availability. I ended my email with the words, "I'm desperate for a retreat."

The response I received was that while the retreat house was not open due to the pandemic, they were allowing clergy to stay in the guesthouse if they wanted to. They ended their email with "We see you. We hear you." They were the answer to my prayers for refuge and quiet. None of us are unaffected by the pandemic that has been raging on since February. And I certainly fell into that affected category and I needed that particular prayer to be answered.

Our Gospel reading today introduces us to someone who needed her prayers answered. She is called the Canaanite woman in Matthew, and the Syrophenician Woman in Mark's gospel. The Canaanites were gentiles, separate and apart from the Jews. There are so many things that could be said about this encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman – the power dynamics, the socio-economic dynamics, the gender dynamics.

But what resonates most for me is her voice. We've all heard her before, and we all might have been her before at some point in our lives – stressed and at the end of our ropes, desperate according to the circumstances we find ourselves in. We are pushed to an edge where we can only shout out "Help!" And this is the mother's cry we hear today. Her daughter is suffering and the Canaanite woman leaves her home to search and find Jesus and ask for his help. They would likely not have had much to do with each other, but this circumstance brings them together.

So what does Jesus do in the face of her plea for help? The Gospel says the "He did not answer her." Really, Jesus? This passage makes me cringe because Jesus, the one who I believe is trying to ever expand the Circle (with a big C) and bring as many people into a sense of love and wholeness says that this woman is, in fact, excluded from that circle. Banished to a land where not a thought would be given for her and, more disturbingly, her daughter. It's sounds painful, doesn't it? A total rejection of what we know of Christ. Even if he later came around to her, we still have to acknowledge the callousness in his voice when he tells her that he's not here to tend to anyone other than the lost sheep of Israel, of which she was not one.

Rejection can be the cruelest of cuts. I'm not only speaking of rejection that excludes people from centers of power, leaving people marginalized for a variety of reasons. I'm talking about how we reject the goodness and "Godness" in our relationships when we gossip about others, or talk maliciously about them behind their backs, or treat them in ways that says that they are not part of our tribe. When in all actuality, we are all members of the same tribe. Sometimes, however, we try to make ourselves the "Chosen Ones", with no relation to those we think are below or beyond us. Call them what you will – cliques, cabals, in-crowd, you name it – when mixed with a sense of maliciousness, we become dangerous even unto ourselves, because at some point we will find ourselves on the outside, not part of the in-crowd, sitting on the margin.

While I was on retreat, I read a fabulous book titled "Here All Along" by Sarah Hurwitz. The book was about Hurwitz's relationship with Judaism and her spiritual journey that took her from someone who casually claimed her Jewish faith, to someone who actively started to develop her own spiritual sense of identity and who started to live an embodied faith. It's a wonderful book for anyone trying to figure out how to live more deeply into their faith, whatever it may be, through the basic spiritual practices that most faiths have: prayer, ritual, study and community building.

In this book, Hurwitz addresses the idea of the Jews as a "chosen people". She has an uneasy relationship with that term, and I would as well if it were attached to me in any way. But she makes two points that really open up my understanding of relationship with God:

First, she says that "while the God depicted in the Torah may have chosen the Israelites for a particular covenant and mission, that does not mean God cares any less for those outside the covenant." In other words, God's love is not confined to a certain or chosen few. Groups may claim that love in ways that are particular to that group, but God's love can never be theirs alone. That's true for any organized religion.

Second, and related to the first point, whenever we seek to move closer to God or to enter into loving and nurturing relationships with others, instead of being the "chosen people" we become the "choosing people". Choosing God, choosing relationships, choosing compassion, choosing justice and equity, choosing to love the stranger. Our agency in choosing God gives us skin in the game and we can claim what is freely given through God's grace. And the Canaanite woman's response to Jesus, that "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table," is exactly what it looks like to be a choosing people, staking a claim on God. Instead of being put off by Jesus's words, the Canaanite woman leans in and claims a relationship with Jesus.

Now there are many theories as to why Jesus rebuffed the Canaanite woman, and most of the theories don't put Jesus in a very kind light. But I'm more interested in the fact that his mind did change, his world got bigger and he, too, leaned into a new relationship. I always wonder if the words God spoke in today's first reading from Isaiah was in Jesus's mind. Remember God said, "And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord...these will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer." It is already in

the DNA of Jesus to love and serve everybody, regardless of whether they are one of the Lost Tribes, a foreigner, or a stranger.

When we are able to be a choosing people, a people who consciously claim relationship with God and with others, we can also say "We see you. We hear you." Ultimately, we can be the answers to one another's prayers. Amen.