

August 17 Hope For Outsiders

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Matthew 15:21-28 (NRSV)

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. [22] Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

[23] But he did not answer her at all.

And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."

[24] He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

[25] But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." [26] He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." [27] She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

[28] Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

BOB BECOMES A YOUTH MINISTER

Sometimes a chance encounter with an outsider changes everything. This week in a magazine produced by Austin Presbyterian Seminary called "Windows" I read about such an encounter.

In 1975 Bob Lively was the new youth director at the First Presbyterian Church of Dallas Texas. And Bob wasn't particularly thrilled with his new job.

In fact after his interview with the search committee Bob had decided to decline the offer if it came his way. He said that he hadn't studied Greek, Hebrew and systematic theology at seminary for three years in order to take a job babysitting sit middle and high school students.

But, when the committee called to offer him the position two weeks later he was amazed to hear himself saying, "Yes, I'd be honored to be your next youth minister." Funny how God sometimes gets us to say "yes" when we thought the answer should be "no."

The prestigious church was in a bad part of town, and was surrounded by homeless people. On the young minister's first day on the job one of the associate pastors came into his office and asked, "Can you help me minister to some of my friends on the street?"

Bob said, "Well, I guess so." He followed the associate down the stairs where three "tough looking hombres" waited. The associate told Bob, "Now son minister to our friends here in the name of Jesus Christ."

And then he left the young minister all alone with the street people. (I can just see the associate chuckling as climbed the steps.)

After an awkward silence Bob asked them how he could help them, and one of the guys said, "Brother, we're hungry. We need some food."

The new minister didn't know where to get any food so he went running up the stairs and into the associate pastor's office for help. He said, "These guys are hungry. What do I do?"

The associate was clearly enjoying this. He instructed the young minister how to find the food closet that was (from his point of view) conveniently located about ten yards from the youth minister's new office.

He found several cans of food (with the labels removed so they couldn't sell them on the street for booze).

He put the cans in a paper bag, ran down the stairs, delivered them to the homeless guys and returned to his office.

But, almost as soon as he arrived the associate alerted him to the fact that there were more clients that needed his attention.

Bob said that he learned why the committee wanted to hire someone still in their twenties. He had to be sufficiently fit to run up and down the stairs a hundred times a day feeding the homeless that came to the door.

Bob became even more dissatisfied with his new job. Instead of being a minister he was spending his time as a babysitter and a grocery clerk.

Over the next few months the same pattern continued.

The phone in his office would ring and Bob would run down the stairs to deliver the groceries.

AN ENCOUNTER WITH A WILD MAN

But, on one September day an encounter with one of these needy people would change everything. Once again the phone in his office rang and Bob dutifully descended the stairs.

And there he met a man whom he said, "appeared to be more wild than civilized." Bob wrote, "He squatted in a corner; his head was bowed, his shaggy hair knotted and riddled with what appeared to be a full bushel of grass burrs."

The stench he emitted was close to suffocating; what clothes he wore had been reduced to rags. His feet were bare and bleeding leaving smudges of blood on the linoleum.”

A secretary frantically approached Bob on behalf of the office staff and whispered, “Make him go away!”

So Bob asked the man how he could be of help, but the man was too disoriented to speak. He just placed his hand to his mouth. Bob asked, “You’re hungry?” And the man nodded.

The youth director raced upstairs to quickly fill a bag with some canned food. But, the cupboard was almost bare. Only two cans remained. One contained sugar beets and the other contained shredded coconut.

The young pastor returned to the first floor and gave this unlikely meal to the man. He took the bag without a word.

Bob watched as the man took the cans and pried them open with a pocketknife and ate them. The desperate man sat alone on the curb as he ate. Bob wrote,

“As I pondered the tragic scene unfolding between two parked cars, I felt an unfamiliar ache in my heart. Immediately above me I could hear the sound of workmen assembling the expensive new sanctuary organ.” By the way, that organ cost over a half million dollars even in 1975!

DANGEROUS PROPHECY

The young minister remembered some words from the prophets Amos and Isaiah, “Take away from me the noise of your songs.” These prophets said that God was not so impressed with fancy worship services. God was impressed with those who were willing to show mercy toward the poor.

The prophets challenged the religious leaders in Jerusalem to worship God with their actions instead of their words and rituals. True worship would consist of sharing their bread with the “homeless poor” and clothing the “naked.” (cf. Isaiah 58:5-7)

I understand what Bob was talking about. I too have had those moments when the ancient words of the Bible become powerfully modern and relevant. I have learned that those moments occur right before I get myself into big trouble!

And it seemed like Bob was about to learn this lesson. He stormed into the senior minister’s office (for those of you unfamiliar with tall steeple churches let me assure you that this is never a good thing to do) and then he announced, “I’d like to show you something.”

Surprisingly the senior minister didn't protest but just followed the youth minister to the front door. There he saw the disheveled man finishing the lunch they had provided. Bob said that the coconut still clung to his beard like icicles in January.

He told the senior minister, "That man sitting out there on the curb came to us hungry, and in the name of Jesus Christ this church offered him two canned goods, labels removed. One small can contained beets and the other coconut."

The youth minister thought that this was enough prophecy for one day. It was time to retreat to his office. He said that he began to weep, and he decided that either that church would do something for the hungry or he'd leave before the year was out.

A CRY FOR HELP

This pastor's story sort of reminded me of our lesson for today.

Jesus and his disciples made their way to Tyre and Sidon. Tyre and Sidon were on the other side of the tracks, pagan territory. In fact, Sidon was the home town of the infamous Jezebel, the foreign queen who married King Ahab of Israel and led the whole land in a time of apostasy and Baal worship.

Why Jesus and the disciples went to a place with a reputation like this we don't know. Maybe they went there with the hope of getting away from the crowds. Maybe they figured that nobody in this pagan place would be interested in anything pertaining to the Kingdom. Jesus could get in a little quality time with his disciples or maybe even some well deserved rest.

But, if this was their desire, it did not work out as they had hoped. Their retreat was interrupted. A Canaanite woman came and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David. My daughter is tormented by a demon." Over and over and over she shouted.

SEND HER AWAY

And Jesus didn't say anything.

There's been lots of speculation about why Jesus didn't say anything. We really don't know. Maybe he was trying to teach his disciples a lesson about mercy much like the associate minister was trying to teach the new youth minister about hunger.

Regardless of his motives Jesus' unwillingness to speak to the woman was proving to be a problem. This woman kept shouting, and the disciples (much like the secretaries at the large Presbyterian Church) were starting to get a bit nervous.

They told Jesus, "Will you please just send this woman away. We're not supposed to be talking to women in public. And in addition to being a pagan, this 'Jezebel' is also a nut case. We could get into trouble if she keeps following us around."

And then Jesus says something very surprising. He speaks so everyone around him can hear,

“Hey, I’m not going to dignify this woman’s shouts with a reply. I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. We’ve crossed the border. Haven’t you heard that God’s grace and salvation stop at the border?”

It’s at this point that the woman confronts Jesus more directly. Instead of chasing after him, she kneels before him and makes her request once again, “Lord, help me.”

Surely Jesus will respond to the woman with compassion now.

But, once again we are surprised by his response. Jesus says,

“It’s just not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

What is going on with Jesus?

Why doesn’t he just help this poor woman?

FAITH BEYOND THE BOUNDARY

But, the Canaanite woman is not deterred by even this disparaging remark. She replies, “Yes, Lord, that’s true. But, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

And all of a sudden the tables are turned.

Instead of being a pagan woman who is without hope and without voice she is lifted up by Jesus as an example of faith.

Jesus said, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

And her daughter was healed instantly.

What is the point of this story?

I would suggest that it is a story that shows us how God can use a seemingly chance encounter with a person beyond the boundary of what we deem acceptable as a way to teach a lesson about the kingdom of God.

One woman’s persistent cry changes everything.

GO YE THEREFORE

You’ll miss the point of this story if you rip it from its context.

The great theme of Matthew's story is how salvation comes not only to the Jews but also to the whole world. Our anthem this morning should be playing in your head as you read Matthew's gospel.

"Go ye therefore ... teach all nations ... baptizing them in the name of the Lord."

You see, Matthew's gospel is all about how ministry gets expanded. In Matthew's gospel grace never stops at national boundaries or cultural boundaries or religious boundaries.

God's grace isn't just for the well heeled or the religious elite or the morally superior. God's grace is for everyone.

And these stories are a way of making this plain.

When Jesus goes into pagan country and helps people in need, he is doing more than just satisfying the needs of one person. He is teaching his disciples about a greater kingdom, a kingdom that always goes beyond the borders of what they know and understand.

That's how it worked back then, and that's how it works today.

THE REST OF THE STORY

And now (as Paul Harvey would say) we have the rest of the story about Bob and his struggles at the First Presbyterian Church of Dallas.

Bob Lively didn't lose his job, nor did he quit.
(In fact he stayed for ten more years.)

And the senior pastor and the associate pastor were not as hard hearted as Bob might have thought at first. They got together and made an "executive" decision.

They decided to ram through the idea of developing a feeding program for the homeless. And so a program called "The Stewpot" was born at the First Presbyterian Church of Dallas, Texas.

Bob, the associate and a few volunteers opened the doors of the church to the homeless that first day.

They were uncertain at first where they would get the money or the resources to do the job, but the program quickly grew.

Oh, there were some who wanted to send these undesirables away.

But, in the long run there were many more who wanted to invite them in. The church got some good publicity from the local paper, and in the first week \$10,000 was donated to the program.

And the ministry continued to grow from that time on.

Bob wrote,

“In time the Stewpot would evolve into one of Dallas’ most respected institutions.

In fact, on my final day on the pastoral staff of First Church, then Mayor Stark Taylor stated in a proclamation passed by the City Council that the Stewpot had raised the consciousness of an entire city regarding the needs of the poor and the homeless.”

THE STEWPOT TODAY

On January 14, 2008 the Stewpot served its 2,500,00th meal. This year the program was moved to a new facility operated by the city called the Bridge. This new facility sees to all the needs of the homeless.

But, the First Presbyterian Church of Dallas is still involved with the ministry. They now serve three meals a day at that facility with paid staff and over 400 volunteers. In only one day in June they served a record 2,461 meals.

The numbers are impressive. But, I would suggest that we can trace the birth of this wonderful ministry to a seemingly chance encounter.

A discouraged youth minister met a man from the other side of the tracks. Everyone including the youth minister wanted him to go away.

But, the Holy Spirit was speaking through that man. And when they responded to that one man a whole city was eventually changed for the better.

And that’s what’s going on in our lesson for today. A pagan woman from the land of Jezebel became a symbol of hope for a wider ministry. It wasn’t a chance encounter after all. It was God offering hope and help to all people who live beyond the borders of what we find acceptable.

MINISTRY BY INTERRUPTION

I think that’s how ministry often comes to us. It doesn’t always come from our committee meetings or even our carefully planned worship experiences.

It comes in the form of someone who keeps bugging us, someone who is shouting at us and who refuses to be silent. It comes in the form of one, who is unknown to us, a person from a different culture and even a different faith.

It comes when our agenda is interrupted by one who is so needy and desperate that they refuse to go away.

It comes to us in that divinely teachable moment when we catch a glimpse of faith and hope that is greater than we could ever imagine.

I have often said that ministry occurs by interruption. Ministry does not come from a cold, calculating professionalism. Ministry comes when there is a cry for help from someone in need and God sends someone like Moses or Isaiah or Jesus or Paul or Bob Lively or even someone like you or me.

And the grace and salvation of God is always greater than it seems. Not only is one person fed or saved or helped in some way. A gracious Spirit is turned loose on the world that changes us all.

May the grace of God come to us this day in new and surprising ways. May He give us ears to hear and eyes to see the overwhelming importance of the one who comes into our life and cries for help.

Amen.

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