

"Help Me"

Matthew 15:21-28 "Canaanite Woman" Pentecost 14A AUG 17 2008

"Help me!"

Imagine summoning up all of your hopes and dreams, all of your prayers and needs, and you offer them to Jesus, trusting that he can help, trusting that he will listen, trusting that he cares, trusting that he loves you and will stop at nothing to help you. Imagine that this is your prayer, your hope, your dream. And with all of the faith that you can dig deep to find, you put your prayer before Jesus.

What will he say? How will he respond? How will he answer you? Yes? Or No!

No! Can you believe it? Jesus says, "no!"

That's what the Bible story is all about. A woman approaches Jesus crying out, "*Help me! My daughter is sick and dying! Help me!*" Now listen to how Jesus and his disciples react: "*Help me!*" Jesus says nothing. "*Help me!*" The disciples beg Jesus to send her away for making too much noise. "*Help me!*" And then Jesus says, "*Sorry, I don't help foreigners*". "*Help me!*" And then Jesus says, "*It's not right for me to take food from children and feed it to dogs!*" So here you are: Jesus ignores her. The disciples want her to go away. Then Jesus says he won't help her. And then he offers a terrible insult in comparing the woman and her daughter to scavenging dogs.

Are we hearing this right? Jesus, the son of God, the Prince of Peace, the Messiah, the one who is known for sharing bread with 5000 hungry people, and healing people in every village along the way, says "no" to this woman in her moment of need.

I can't think of any other story in the Gospels that is anything like this. I can't think of any other story in the Gospels when Jesus says "no".

I can explain a little of it. There were rigid ethnic and religious differences that governed social affairs in those times. It was highly inappropriate for the woman to even try to speak to Jesus, because her ethnic and religious group was different. And it was just as inappropriate for Jesus to respond to her. No one would have been the least bit surprised at how Jesus responded because they would have done exactly the same without any hesitation.

But something happens, and I think it gives us an incredible insight into Jesus that we find nowhere else in the Gospels. You are getting a rare insight this morning.

A theme for our mission trips this month (part 2 begins tomorrow morning) is "boundaries". We are working in places that bring us into direct contact with people like the Canaanite woman, a foreigner, people that we have had little or no dealings with in the past. We worked with a pastor in Medina whose congregation is composed of mostly illegal, undocumented farm workers. While we might have ignored or avoided having dealings with that group of people in the past, we crossed over a boundary and made friends. The pastor told me that his own denomination ignores his church's needs, and that he was incredibly grateful that we Presbyterians from Byron were willing to help. Others of us spent the week in Holley working with the little children of the men and woman who are migrant workers. We looked into their eyes, saw their smiles, enjoyed their hugs, and in doing so crossed a boundary. We'll no longer see these children or their families in the way we once did.

In the course of this story Jesus shows how much he is like us, at first he easily reflects the boundaries of his day, which meant keeping away from foreigners. But that woman won't back away like she is supposed to, and she keeps coming back at him. "*Help me! Help me!*" And then something happens: Jesus changes his mind. Jesus changes his mind. It's not a flip-flop, it's not a weakness, he sees something he hasn't understood before, and he changes his mind. From this point on, in the Gospel, Jesus is different. The road to the cross is not simply a physical journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, it's a spiritual journey from the parochial to the universal, from a small circle of people like himself to a very large circle. He begins in his small village, but at the end of the journey his hope and vision are not just for his immediate family and friends, but for the outcasts and the foreigners.

And here's the vital, crucial, essential point of the story, if Jesus could change, so can we! What kind of change is God stirring up in you

The Lord's Supper ... think of it as our shout for help, and Jesus answering. Maybe when he offered the first invitation to it he wasn't thinking of someone like you. Now he is. No matter how far away from him you think you are, he's answering.