

The Rev. Andie Rohrs
Year A, Proper 15
Matthew 15
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I grew up spending my summers at a rustic, all girls camp in the mountains of Tennessee. The camp was started by two women, Miss Dolly and Miss Sara, in the 1940s. Miss Dolly and Miss Sara were best of friends, and by the time I started going to camp, they were in their 80s. While the camp was not explicitly Christian, we had church on Sunday mornings where we sang songs and heard poems and stories related to friendship, kindness, and compassion – values Miss Dolly and Miss Sara sought to instill in their campers. One of my favorite Miss Dolly quotes that we heard summer after summer was, “I never have to be ashamed of words I do not say.”

This quote speaks to the power of words, and it echoes the beginning of our gospel reading today. The disciples come to Jesus, telling him that he has offended the Pharisees. He criticizes the Pharisees for their focus on tradition and says that faithful discipleship is not about meaningless rituals but rather about purity of one’s heart and spirit. “What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and that is what defiles,” Jesus says. In the twelfth chapter of Matthew, he puts it in a more positive way, saying, “For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.” The implication is that our words are powerful reflections our faith.

So it is interesting that just after this, we have the second part of today’s gospel reading: Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman. It is one of the most confusing and potentially disturbing stories we have about Jesus, and his words are harsh. He and his disciples are traveling and suddenly this Canaanite woman comes to him shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” At first, Jesus ignores her cries. When she continues, he says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” – in other words, not to Gentiles like herself. And yet, she persists, kneeling before him and saying “Lord, help me.” Jesus replies by likening her to a dog. But the woman still is not deterred. She seizes on this metaphor and says, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ tables.” And it is then that Jesus praises her remarkable faith and heals her tormented daughter.

Countless interpretations have been offered for this challenging exchange, and none can be fully explored in the context of a sermon. The woman was what one scholar called a “triple outsider” on the basis of her gender, her ethnicity, and her identity as a Gentile. Furthermore, by approaching Jesus and shouting her demands, she was violating the social norms for women’s behavior in ancient times. While it may be hard for us to consider, Jesus’ ungracious response could be a reflection of his own prejudice and assumptions - the fact that he was a product of his time, so to speak.

Alternatively, the exchange could be an illustration of the fact that although Jesus was God incarnate, he was also fully human and, like us, had moments when he was, as one person said, “caught with his compassion down.” We know that his ministry was exhausting for him because the gospel writers often speak of his need to evade crowds and to retreat to rest and pray. Perhaps the Canaanite woman approached him at a time when he just couldn’t handle another person demanding something from him.

Some scholars suggest explanations that are more palatable – that he was testing the woman to make a point to the disciples, or that he was using the exchange ironically to illustrate his earlier point about the power of words.

We don't know. There is not a neat and tidy way to explain his harsh words and we are left to wrestle with the text. A few things are clear, though. First, the Canaanite woman had reason to think that Jesus could heal her tormented daughter. Even in the face of his seeming indifference, she believes in him. And even when he tells her that his mission is to the Jews alone, she persists by expressing her hope that God's mercy extends beyond the chosen people of Israel to include all people. She trusts that the expansiveness of God's salvation knows no bounds. Her words that "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" are powerful to Jesus, and he declares that this is great faith and heals her daughter.

And while we don't know how he understood his ministry before this encounter or whether or not this woman changed his mind, we do know that from this point forward, Jesus understands that his mission not just to the Jews, but to all people. His last words to his disciples in Matthew are: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of *all* nations."

Again, powerful words. And yet, as powerful as words can be, we also know that actions speak louder than words. St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words." Similarly, Mahatma Gandhi said, "We do not need to proselytize either by our speech or by our writing. We can only do so really with our lives." Ultimately, it was Jesus' actions – his death and resurrection – that opened the way of salvation for all people. We are called as individuals and as a church not only to speak of that good news, but to live it by reflecting the radical hospitality and love of God in all that we do.

There is a story about some soldiers who were fighting overseas and lost a friend in battle. They took their friend's body to the nearby village and asked the priest there if they could bury him in the graveyard next to the church. The priest asked if the man was a Christian, and his friends replied that he was not. "Well, then," said the priest, "you'll have to bury him outside the fence of the cemetery." So the soldiers did and then travelled on. Years later when the war was over, they returned to visit the grave of their fallen friend, but they could not find it. They were, of course, very concerned, and they went to the priest and said, "Father, we cannot find our friend's grave. Did you move his body?" The priest replied, "No. I moved the fence."

Like the Canaanite woman, the priest came to know the inclusiveness and the expansiveness of God's love and mercy. May we do the same, and may we reflect it in all that we say and in all that we do. Amen.