

Reading: Matthew 15:21 – 28

Date: August 16

Head versus Heart

What are we to make of this reading? Maybe we could picture Jesus with a twinkle in his eye, teasing the woman? Maybe we could see it as a lesson in humility, the woman starts off shouting and demanding but only gets healing when she recognises her place in the order of God's will? Maybe it's an example of Matthew adopting one of Jesus favourite techniques of hyperbole to give a lesson in cross cultural acceptance to his community? With what other reading can we compare this story to help us understand? Maybe the story of the centurion asking for healing for his servant? The woman at the well? Naaman and Elisha? Maybe it should sit it beside Jacob wrestling with the angel, because this is a story that some will come away from with a theological limp because of what it seems to say about Jesus. This is a story with no easy answers or lessons. This is not the gracious, merciful, compassionate Jesus that we are comfortable with. This is not the same Jesus as we encountered last week, walking on the water, and knowing the hearts of the disciples. And I don't think we can write it off as Jesus acting poorly to show his disciples what acting poorly looks like. After berating some Pharisees over their traditions that valued external cleanliness over internal faithfulness, Jesus must face his own traditions of God being Israel's God. What we have here is an example of the painful, life changing process of confronting long held traditions that are about God for us instead of God for all.

The issue at stake here for most of us is not whether this Gentile woman can receive healing for her daughter, it's 'who is Jesus'? The issue is the tension in our minds and our hearts between Jesus the divine, compassionate, all knowing Son of God and Jesus the human, Jewish son of Mary. We are happy when the son of Mary is like us in being tired or in being emotional, but we are less happy when he looks to be like us in displaying anger or when there is any mention of him having a relationship with Mary Magdalene. And we are distinctly uncomfortable in this story when the son of Mary, raised in Jewish Galilee shows racial prejudice towards this woman from Tyre and Sidon. We are even more uncomfortable when Matthew uses the term Canaanite and our minds are taken to all those old, blood thirsty, violent stories from Joshua and Judges. Who is this Jesus in Tyre and Sidon? Where is the Jesus we like? The Prince of Peace and the Saviour of the World? The Jesus who loves little children and shows mercy to the blind and the lame? We want the Son of God, not the son of Mary. There is an irony here, because it is the son of Mary that we want for our salvation. The real man Jesus, who has lived a human life and understands our weakness and is now with God as intercessor to bring about our acceptability before God. However, we are uncomfortable with stories of Jesus as a real man, because when he is too much like the son of Mary, he reminds us of our own weaknesses, our own failures, and foibles.

There is a style of Bible study that invites people to place themselves in the story as one of the characters. In this story we might choose to be the woman, or one of the disciples, but would we choose to be Jesus as he is pictured? Or would that be too uncomfortable? In this encounter around Tyre and Sidon, we are being forced to confront our traditions, our beliefs, and behaviours

that we feel make us unique and acceptable before God and allow us to consider others as less worthy.

The encounter with the Pharisees over the food and cleanliness traditions shows that Jesus had the head knowledge that God is greater and more inclusive than the traditions allow. “Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and that is what defiles.” A bold teaching for a people with so many traditions about cleaning pots and being careful with food. And then in the very next story, he, out of his heart, calls a woman seeking mercy a dog! Head versus heart. The human Jesus showing up our human propensity to let deeply held values lead us to act in a way that conflicts with our beliefs. We are uncomfortable with this Jesus because we see too much of ourselves in his behaviour. Give us a story where Jesus tells off the disciples for acting like that, or the Pharisees, then we will be more comfortable with the Gospel. But the Gospel is meant to make us uncomfortable. It is meant to send us on this painful, life long, but life-giving process of confronting long held traditions that are about God for us instead of God for all.

One of the most profound truths I was taught in Lay Preacher training is that you cannot preach unless the text has preached to you. This text has forced me to confront the traditions that I hold that stand in the way of making the love of God available to all people. My head knowledge, which I have shared in many sermons, tells me about inclusive language, different learning styles, different worship styles and the need for new words and ways for new generations and cultures. But my heart cries tradition. Traditions of worship and behaviour and values that are as much a part of a working-class upbringing as they are a part of Reformed English Protestant worship and theology. There are ways to do things that may not be God given, but they were given by godly people and practiced for centuries so they must be right! And into that head versus heart conflict comes this story of a woman crossing boundaries of tradition to get to God. All the traditions that were about being the people of God, traditions that made the people of Israel different to their neighbours and built a belief that it was the traditions that made them holy, not their relationship with God or the faith they professed. Traditions that even Jesus had absorbed in his youth and held in his heart, even though his mind knew better.

It's not enough that Jesus healed the woman and showed God's love for all people, there are other stories in the Gospel with that message. This story was held and told in the early church, and written down by Matthew and Mark, to carry the extra message of the pervasive nature of traditions that can get in the way of the Gospel and limit God's love. It not just about Jew versus Gentile; the Word of god is living and relevant in every century and culture. This is about taking the head knowledge of the good news of God's love opening up acceptance and inclusion for all people, and challenging all the traditions that limit that good news to people like us, to people who talk like us, to people who worship like us or to people who are polite enough to come to us and ask in the proper way. Jesus got a lesson in the openness of God's love and that lesson is for all of us. Don't let the traditions that warm our hearts stop our heads from sharing the love of God to everyone.

Rev Ross Pearce ©

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