

“Awakened to Heal”

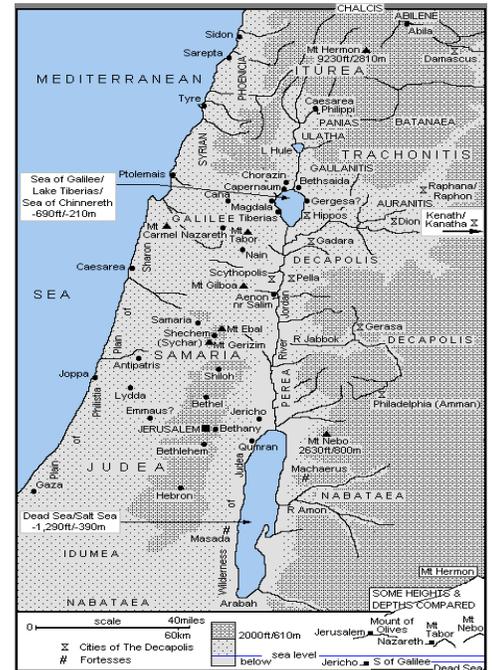
There are times when a change of scenery is helpful. I expect many of us are yearning for the chance to travel more freely—to get out of the “Middleburg bubble” as a friend of mine calls it. We know from the scripture readings over the past weeks that Jesus has been trying to get some alone time for prayer and recharging. He has tried to escape to the hills and across a lake but without much success. Because he is finding it impossible to get some respite in his home region of Galilee he heads to the “district of Tyre and Sidon.”¹ If you are not familiar with the geography of the area a map might help (See right).

As you can see from this map Tyre and Sidon are not part of Palestine/Israel. They are northeast of Galilee up the Mediterranean coast at the top of the map. By going to the “district of Tyre and Sidon” Jesus has made a major move. He and his disciples have walked between 40 and 60 miles from the Sea of Galilee (the larger body of water in the top half of the map) to make this journey. It seems the plan was to get away to an area where they would be anonymous. Despite their desire for anonymity, his reputation catches up with him in the form of a Canaanite woman who is mother to a sick child. What ensues is one of the most powerful passages in the Gospels.

The unnamed woman cries out to Jesus for help. Despite being a Canaanite, a Gentile, she calls Jesus the “Son of David.” A reference to King David and by implication calling Jesus a messiah, one who has been anointed by God as David was. She has clearly been looking far and wide for a cure for her daughter’s demons. She is willing to even seek the help of someone outside of her faith for healing.

Leaving nothing to chance, she accosts him and his disciples loudly. Yet, Jesus ignores her. Despite this snub, the Canaanite woman does not turn away. She shouts even louder. Her imprecations and pleadings are so persistent that the disciples ask Jesus to intervene and get rid of her. She is annoying and perhaps embarrassing for them. Whatever the reason, they just want her to go away.

Jesus’s response to the woman is uncharacteristically cold and pitiless. He tells her his mission is only to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Still, she persists in her pleading. She even gets down on her knees and begs, “Lord, help me.” Jesus’ response is absolutely heartless. Without an ounce of pity in his words he tells her “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Yes, you heard correctly. Jesus whom we know as a healer full of compassion and mercy even for the least of these, just called this woman a dog. This should be shocking. I expect any one of us would be stunned into silence if we were called dogs, especially by the Son of David.



¹ Matthew 15:21-28

However, this woman is the exemplar of persistence. Her daughter's need is so profound she will not give up. She responds saying, "...even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." That is hutzpah. There are few people in the Bible who argue with Jesus so unashamedly.

In that moment two extraordinary things happen. First, Jesus relents and heals her daughter immediately. Second, and by far the most important, Jesus realizes something new about his ministry. Through this exchange with the unnamed Canaanite woman Jesus learns that his ministry is broader than he had realized.

It is a powerful moment. Someone with three strikes against her—she is female, a pagan and an outsider—through her persistent requests for Jesus' help on behalf of her daughter, gives Jesus an awakening. In 70s vernacular he had his consciousness raise. In today's popular vocabulary he has become woke.

This is an incredibly important teaching for you and me. Jesus in this short passage is confronted by the assumptions and prejudices his society taught him. He persisted in his beliefs for a bit until confronted with the indisputable fact of her humanity. The turning point is when she takes his comment about dogs and turns in around on him.

Our theology teaches us that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. In this instance his fully human part was getting the better of him until the Canaanite woman woke him up to his better self. The self who remembered, that all people regardless of their background, race, creed, color, and gender are capable of faith and deserving of God's grace and mercy.

For Jesus it only took this short exchange to overcome his prejudice. For you and me it may take a lifetime. But in this liminal moment in our history we have the opportunity to take Jesus' example and accept, if not proclaim, the worth of every human life. This belief is so important within our tradition that when we are baptized and confirmed we affirm that we will "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being."² For some reason we are wont to forget or to sublimate this part of our Baptismal Covenant. Perhaps that is why we reaffirm it each time we witness a baptism or confirmation.

If even Jesus can fall prey to prejudice, we are bond to. Sadly, it seems that there is something within the way we are raised or the programming of our DNA that makes us fearful of and intolerant of someone whom we perceive as different or alien. Difference is perceived as dangerous. Perhaps on the savannah of Africa or the Steppes of the Caucuses it was. Jesus through his actions and ministry came to break down tribalism and fear with love and compassion.

We are not lost for we have Jesus' example of overcoming prejudice. Jesus shows us that we have the ability to change our minds. Jesus shows us that we owe it to ourselves to welcome others. Prejudice does not heal, it does not make us whole, it does not make us better. It wounds everyone involved. The Good News is that we can give up our prejudices and find healing for ourselves and others in Jesus name.

² Book of Common Prayer, p. 305