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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
Proper 15, August 16, 2020
Matthew 15:21-29

It is good to be together. For you, together *again*. For me, this is the first time I have been able to gather with you in person. What a glorious day! In this beautiful garden! I wanted a warm and fuzzy gospel story today for us to sink into together. But that is not what we have. Instead, we have one of the most challenging passages in the Gospel to consider this morning.

Jesus has just entered the region of Tyre and Sidon. This is a heavily gentile region, a non-Jewish area. So Jesus and his disciples were among people with whom they had little or nothing in common. They encounter a Canaanite woman who is crying out to Jesus, shouting at him to heal her sick daughter. It's important to note that Matthew chooses the word Canaanite. This same story appears in Mark's Gospel but the woman is identified as a Syrophenician woman. That is a more geographically correct term but Matthew is digging back into Israelite history – the Canaanites were the enemy in the land that God had promised to Israel. This woman is “the enemy.” And she is a woman daring to talk to a man first, a Jewish man. This is a deeply uncomfortable situation – all the social rules are being broken and all the players - Jesus, the disciples, the woman – are out of their comfort zone.

And what does Jesus do? He ignores her. He is silent. The disciples beg him to send her away (just as they did when they were faced with a hungry crowd). But Jesus doesn't do that. When I sit with this story, I can almost see the wheels turning in Jesus's mind: “What do I do here? How do I handle this?” The reply that he finally makes isn't much more compassionate. He tells her he came for the House of Israel – she is not one of them. Matthew's Jesus is confronted with the boundaries of his ministry and he seems reluctant to cross them. He seems to

be agreeing with the disciples that his mission is limited. But he doesn't send the woman away. He engages her in conversation. In doing that, Jesus is deeply touched by her. This woman, this unlikely "other", shows Jesus a belief in God that isn't bound by the boundaries we set up. She has faith in a BIG God, a God whose mercy can't be bound by the limits we set! Jesus sees that. He experiences that with her; and he is deeply moved by her faith.

Is it possible that Jesus had a moment of growth here? But Jesus is God! And yet, Jesus is fully human. Fully human. Is it possible that Jesus grew into his mission as he interacted with people, as he stretched his boundaries, as he constantly stepped away and went deep within to discern his Divine calling? Is it possible that Jesus became the Christ as he lived and struggled and grew?

I believe it is. And I believe that this uncomfortable passage speaks to us as a changing church. The days are gone when people flock to our doors and usual activities. We can't continue to do what we have always done and expect to be vital and vibrant. But the good news is that Jesus gives us a model for mission in today's gospel. He goes out. He confronts his own discomfort and prejudice. He listens. He engages in conversation. He recognizes where God is already working and he is changed by it.

That is our model. To go out into our community. Not to "help" or "fix" it. But to engage with it. To confront our own discomfort and prejudice. To listen. Not to convert others to our way of being but to listen to their story and to recognize God present in it. And to be changed by it.

This is hard work folks. But think of how often Jesus was tired, how often he needed to get away and be alone in prayer. I wonder how many times the disciples wanted to give up. It is

hard work to bring about a new creation. But it is the work we are privileged to be called to. It's going to mean that we have to change – that we let go of the way we have always done things. The choice is ours together. And we do have a choice. Will we cling to the boundaries we have set around what church is? Or are we willing to stretch those boundaries and look for new ways that God is calling us to be agents of God's love and mercy and reconciliation?

I can hear the reasons why this is crazy and it won't work: We are old. We don't have the energy. We are too small. We don't have enough money. We like the way things were. We're not sure we want a new priest to come along and do things differently. But we saw in last week's readings that God works with what IS in order to bring about what CAN BE.

And let me tell you what I have seen in my first month with you that IS: A rich history of building a community in Florissant. A deep love and compassion for one another. A desire for the beauty that reflects God in music and in this outdoor space and in liturgy. A concern for the hungry among us. Hospitality to those recovering from addictions. Great joy and laughter in being together and sharing your lives with one another, even when you disagree. And a sadness born out of love that church is changing.

With a rich story like that what is God wanting to bring about that **can be**? That is up to each of us and all of us together. It's up to us to listen to where God might be leading us, to listen to the stories all around us, to take some risks. It's up to us to trust in the work of the Holy Spirit, work that will challenge our embedded understanding of what church is. This is the mission field my friends. And it's about crossing boundaries and sharing stories and letting the Spirit of God lead us to new places.

The Benedictine nun Joan Chittester says: “We are to see change and challenge in life as God's voice in our ears.” What is God whispering in our ears this morning?