

CONFRONTATION AND HUMILITY

Inspired by Sarah's splendid sermon a few weeks ago, we went to see *Barbie* last week. I won't attempt to say much about it, except that the proclamation made by Gloria about the impossibility of being a woman. Remember the song made famous by Tammy Wynette *Stand By Your Man*? "Giving all your love to just one man" is the least of the problems. Gloria's difficulty has little to do with a man, but a lot to do with men! The bottom line as she tells it: *Women can't win!*

This burst of feminism primed me as I came to the gospel for this week. It's a two-part story in which each part-- at first glance—doesn't seem to have much to do with the other. In part 1, Jesus is teaching his disciples about the limitations of the traditional cultural prohibitions about eating certain foods. Such foods were supposed to render one as "unclean." He then goes on to make the point that it is only what comes out of the heart which can render a person unclean. In light of all the nasty things human beings are capable of, eating with unwashed hands doesn't seem to rise to the level of major concern. Many scholars believe that these ritual prohibitions had to do with practices of hygiene designed to protect from the spread of certain diseases by avoiding precarious foods and insisting on certain hygiene. After all, washing our hands before we eat still seems like a good idea! But others have pointed out that many of these customs served to differentiate one population from another, marking one as being *special* or *set apart*. The problem is that many of these customs were practiced in different groups, bound together by a single semitic identity. As we have seen, a great deal of effort has been made historically to sort out the *chosen* and the *non-chosen*. Jesus seems to be implying that these distinctions don't mean very much, since it is faith and behavior which are most important.

This is the link to part-two of the story, but in a surprising way. Jesus seems to actually contradict himself in his actions, at least in terms of his counsel to be loving. When the Canaanite woman appears—someone who by custom and tradition is the *other*, the outsider—Jesus literally ignores her. The disciples then gang up and urge him to send this annoying woman away. Jesus utters something about being only sent for the lost sheep of Israel, which in retrospect seems fairly lame as a rationale. He didn't even bother to be nice to her! Nevertheless, she persists. Then Jesus gets really nasty: *It's is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs*. Now she's got him. *Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table*. Touche! At that point, Jesus changes his stance, comments on her faith, and grants her request. Indeed, this woman has faith. She also has *chutzpah!*

I've always imagined that this woman in the story spoke to Jesus with a polite, submissive tone. This time I heard her as frantic—maybe even a bit pissed or even angry. Her child is dying, after all. This isn't a moment for decorous dialogue! The truth is that this woman confronts Jesus in a way which his disciples rarely did. But she is also one of the many women throughout the gospels who are assertive and buck the traditional expectations of how "good" women behave. Think of the Samaritan woman at the well, or Mary, sister of Martha, who abandons the obligations of hospitality to sit at the feet of Jesus and absorb his teaching. Or the woman who breached protocol to insert herself among a bunch of men and anoint the feet of Jesus.

One of the most remarkable themes of all of the Gospel stories is the way in which women were accepted and encouraged by Jesus to have full participation in his ministry. And although they were not included among the leadership of the *twelve*, they were often the first to become disciples. Yet perhaps today's gospel also indicates that Jesus actually evolved in his understanding of the importance of women and became more inclusive as his ministry progressed. In otherwise, he grew in his knowledge and wisdom, but he grew because of the courage of woman such as this Canaanite who dared to call him out of his own presumptions.

What started with Jesus continued in the early Church, both in terms of the recognition of woman in leadership roles, but also the broader realization that the Gospel was meant to be received by all, not just those who shared the lineage of the chosen people. In today's Gospel, which Jesus does not issue an edict that *all are welcomed in the beloved community*, he takes two important steps by unlinking ethical behavior from the external performance of religious ritual and custom, and declaring that even an outsider can demonstrate extraordinary faith and have their lives changed because of it.

Unfortunately, since at least the fourth century, the church has seemed to move backwards in recognizing the equal status of all faithful members of the community regardless of gender and orientation. Then, on July 29, 1974, eleven women had the chutzpah to present themselves for ordination in the Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. They, along with the male Bishops who ordained them, confronted a long tradition as well as a deep seated prejudice against the full meaning of baptismal inclusivity. Even as remarkable is the fact that only two years later, their ordinations were fully recognized and woman's ordination became the norm for the Episcopal Church. It's been a bit of a bumpy ride since then, but we're still on the right track.

Effectively promoting change requires many things, but chief among these things is the courage to confront what is wrong and to face the possibility of the consequences of standing for what is judged to be right. It also requires the humility to accept that we are not always right, or we will not get our way. But change also requires humility on the part of those who are being challenged to change. Most of the most important changes in the history of our society involved the humility of those who—when confronted by injustice—were able to suspend their own defensiveness and open to the reality of what they were learning about the experience of those who so often were relegated to the status of the *other*. We have the example of Jesus in this. Certainly his acceptance of an unjust death is the supreme example. But there are many other instances—such as when he stands before a grieving mother and comes to know that she is not to be rejected just because of her social identity.

We may at times encounter hearts which are cold and indifferent, or even malicious. Acting with hearts such as these may have terrible consequences. But we are called to have hearts that are open—that are strong, loving and wise. May we have the humility to seek these kind of hearts, within ourselves and in others.

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