

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Anne H.K. Apple
Sunday, August 16, 2020

Matthew 15:21-28

1 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. **22** Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” **23** But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” **24** He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” **25** But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” **26** He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” **27** She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” **28** Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

This is the Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

The backstory for today’s scripture lesson is that the Pharisees and Scribes had come from Jerusalem to confront Jesus. They are concerned about handwashing and Jesus is concerned about what’s inside human hearts. They are concerned about ritual cleanliness codes, and Jesus is concerned about creating clean hearts. The disciples witness the frustration of the Pharisees and Scribes and ask, “Jesus, do you know the scandal you have caused?”

Turn that question around and it gives us an intriguing question for Confirmation Sunday. Maybe every year at confirmation, as a congregation, we should ask ourselves, “What sort of scandal is Jesus causing in our life?”

Jesus has left that place of confrontation and questioning and goes to the district of Tyre and Sidon. He leaves the land to which he is called and enters the foreign land of the Canaanite woman. She shouts, kneels, and persists that the Lord, Jesus, the Son of David can help her, and her tormented daughter. Jesus initially does not answer her at all; and the disciples want him to send her away for all the noise she makes.

This story is an important pivot point in the gospel of Matthew. Initially the disciples and Jesus are sent, and understand their mission field, as to those who are the “lost sheep of the house of Israel.” And by the end of the gospel, we hear Jesus saying to the disciples, after his resurrection when there are some who doubt - although they worship - “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded, and remember, I will be with you to the end of the age.”

Put yourself into this story. Imagine for a moment. Are you the shouting woman, an outsider who can persist for hope in God’s healing mercy? Or would you be one of the disciples with a dismissive petition, “Be frugal. Don’t waste God’s mercy.”

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Who are you willing to be?

An outsider trusting and striving for the abundance of God's healing mercy.

An insider warning and withholding out of scarcity that there isn't enough?

The Canaanite woman finds hope in the possibility of crumbs from the Master's table.

Crumbs. This story turns and becomes a pivot point in the gospel because of one woman's bold, audacious confession of faith. It is her profession of hope that meets the gracious healing power of God. Jesus cries, "Woman, great is your faith!"

We need the persistence and hope of the Canaanite woman and our gifts at work together as disciples. Each of us has a God given gift, and for the sake of God's good world, an interdependence and responsibility to use that gift well.

The Idlewild BASIC group gathered at the Memphis airport in that hour that Frank Kelly had us gather, before the sun broke night into day. We prayed in a big circle, parents took pictures, and, knowing we were going off the grid, we said goodbye to our people. Through security and waiting at the gate, the air was filled with that excitement of doing something new, of traveling to a new place, of being together to serve with Christ in a foreign land.

When we arrived in San Salvador, luggage was missing. Our time at the airport was longer than expected. We landed at a roadside stand for a late lunch. We had a long haul down a dusty footpath ahead us where we would carry our bags down to our camp to settle into a small village. Shadows lengthened as we sat at those wooden picnic tables.

Here, I first met the three sisters. Corn, beans, and squash. We were served pupusas; thick corn tortillas stuffed with mashed beans and squash. On this trip, we ate a lot of corn, beans, and squash. In fact, mostly, we ate corn, beans, and squash. The three sisters grow best together in a garden. The lessons of reciprocity in a three sisters garden have helped me to understand the church and how we serve together.

Corn takes on water quickly. If you pull out a corn stalk, and shake off the dirt, you'd see that the roots don't go very deep, though the stalk grows firm and tall. New bean plants drink in the deeper water trapped in the soil and put out a pair of heart shaped leaves. Their vines climb the corn. The squash seed takes time. Eventually it sprouts and broad, bristly leaves cover the ground. They provide shade, keep moisture in, and discourage the nibbling caterpillars away from the beans.

The Three Sisters garden gives a lesson of reciprocity of needing one another's gifts. On this Confirmation Sunday, I find this lesson helpful. Our confirmands started this ministry in the middle of their ninth-grade year. And now, at the beginning of tenth grade, in small intimate groups of mentors and family, each one came to be confirmed beside the font saying, "I renounce evil. I trust in Jesus Christ. I will be a faithful disciple."

These confirmands did not retreat overnight at church, baking bread and imagining Jesus' profession, "I am the bread of life." nor did they lay on their backs at midnight in the sanctuary and listen for God's presence. These confirmands retreated on Zoom and met with the Session in Zoom breakout rooms to profess their faith. As the church in a pandemic, we have found ourselves in a foreign land with "how we've always done things." These confirmands have gifts and together are charting new ways for being church.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Kimmener, a botanist and member of the Potawatomi Nation, says "The most important thing each of us can know is our unique gift and how to use it

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in the world. Individuality is cherished and nurtured, because, in order for the whole to flourish, each of us has to be strong in who we are and carry our gifts with conviction, so they can be shared with others.”

I believe God intends for us to use our gifts for the sake of the world. Individuality for an individual's sake alone is sinful and self-centered. Knowing who you are and applying your gifts for the health of the whole of humanity - that's God's mercy at play in a world who desperately needs it.

We each are created uniquely in the image of God. We each have a gift that has the ability to make the world a more just, merciful, and loving place. That's what I hope for each confirmand, that you listen for and hone your gift and that this church family helps to affirm that gift. And, that we, as the church, are attentive to your gifts and the potential they bring.

In our church family there are some people who are exceedingly comfortable drawing a chair beside a bed of someone who is dying and saying a prayer; and there are others who wouldn't go near a hospice facility.

There are some who love coaching young children in sports, and others who don't even know Idlewild has a gym and an athletics ministry. There are some who claim, "I am not creative" yet found themselves creating beautiful, meaningful prayer flags out of household scraps. There are some who raise strong, clear voices to injustices they see, and others who cry, 'don't ruffle any feathers, let's keep the status quo.' Different gifts, different people - and all created in God's good image - and gathered here at this place called Idlewild.

Today the confirmands tie their lives to the unlimited grace of God, in Christ Jesus. They stake their lives in the truth that Jesus says, "Great is your faith." "Great is your faith!" Might that be the scandal of Christ at work in our lives. Christ - the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Thanks be to God.