

“Gutsy Faith”
Sermon on Sunday, September 5, 2021

Dear church,

Today’s theme is “gutsy faith.” Our gospel reading features a heroine instead of a hero. The old Sunday School joke that when the teacher asks “who is this about?” – the answer is usually: ‘Jesus!’” – It’s not true in today’s story!!! In fact, one could look at this with the eyes of a modern person and say: we have the early awakenings of a feminist movement on our hands. This woman, a Greek woman from the periphery of Jesus’ home region, she is the one with the gutsy faith in this story. And I am not surprised. When it comes to matters of sickness and health or protecting your family, it’s quite often women who step up and challenge the status quo, forcing the issue, demanding an answer, putting up a fight. If you didn’t know this already: it’s no different in my own household! If we have a tough matter to resolve, put my wife on the phone. She’ll get it done!

The male world has some not-so-nice words for tough women. Often it’s a sign of insecurity more than anything else. And Jesus himself doesn’t look very noble when we look at this story through the lens of gender equality. A woman, a mother approaches him in a time of need. He ignores her, puts her back in place and does everything to get rid of her, using the insult “dogs” in his response. We could speculate about the reasons and there are some hints in Jesus’ answer. Perhaps he didn’t feel he was supposed to serve people in that region, a reflection of the cultural status quo. Was that it? But then he broke the man-made rules of his time in countless other instances.

I have an idea, as unoriginal as they come... Perhaps he simply didn’t like her. How human of Jesus to not like someone! How dare he be so human! It’s the kind of humanity that we Christians prefer not to associate with Jesus. But here it is. And frankly, how could it be any different? The Jesus with the halo, so common in the Renaissance paintings of the old European masters, is just a projection of our own ideals. But God in his infinite wisdom, when he came to us in the flesh and blood of a male human being, chose not to be ideal but human, vulnerable - and occasionally offensive. Perhaps this was just it: for some reason he didn’t click with the woman. Something about her made him uncomfortable. It happens...

This part of the story invites us to be honest with ourselves. Sometimes we are dishonest. We believe that we are the fulfillment of the ideal we hold about ourselves. In our head we are always friendly, always fair, always reasonable. It’s called deception! There are a thousand ways to deceive ourselves or misinterpret things. Sometimes we assume prejudice when the problem lies in the simple realm of humanity. Sometimes we make things more complicated than they need to be.

Many years ago I had an experience in my former parish that I have contemplated many times since. Back then, coming to an older, white parish situated in a culturally diverse neighborhood, - reaching out to our neighbors, making the church a welcoming place for all, was of the highest priority. I was so happy when the first Hispanic family joined the

church and the first African American person became a member! There was a problem though: the African-American lady was not well liked. And when one of the elderly lay women treated her with disrespect, I suspected racism right away. Of course racism was on my radar screen!

However, this elderly lady who had grown up at the church, sometimes had a chip on her shoulder and could be just as tough and offensive with other folks, white folks. She could also be lovely and charming, and one day there was a gathering of Lutheran Church women that she and others had planned. What I noticed at that event was that she had in fact many African American friends, women that she hugged, laughed and joked with, clearly at ease with the color of their skin. And I thought again: what if her comments about the lady who had recently joined our church was mostly of the human variety: dislike and unease, not because of the color of her skin, but because something hit her the wrong way. You know, that happens between human beings! I am not letting her off the hook entirely. She could have been more sensitive or more accommodating at that time. Sure, she could have. But my point is: sometimes we jump to conclusions when we witness things that seem to affirm our suspicions. And we need to be careful with that...

Why did Jesus have a problem with this woman from Syro-Phoenicia, to the west of his home region of Galilee? Was it because of her tribe, her religion, her gender? We don't know for sure. But what we do know is the most important part and the final twist in this story. Jesus allowed himself to have his mind changed by the faith and strength of this woman. He ultimately embraced her gutsy approach. He honored and rewarded her. "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." - This is quite different from the ideal of a perfect, blameless Jesus never makes mistakes, an ideal that dominated much of our theology in years and centuries past. This is about a human being who evolves, able to learn from others, able to change. And I tell you, this is the Jesus I adore, the Jesus I can identify with. Because I have made plenty of mistakes and I have held my own prejudices. But God, in his infinite wisdom, gives us the guts to learn from our mistakes and to bring healing to our world by doing so. It's the gospel of Jesus, the Christ! That gospel will allow you to have the guts to be wrong sometimes so that God can change you.

Amen.