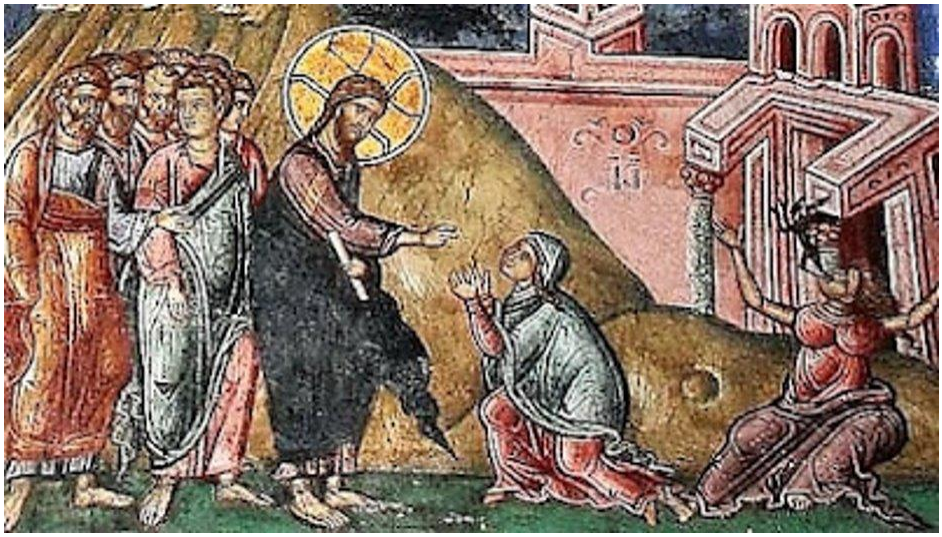
The Venerable Rena Turnham
Proper 15
August 20, 2023
St. John's Episcopal Church - Minneapolis
Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

"Faithfulness"



In the name of the one who knows all hearts and loves all people. Amen.

Throughout Matthew's Gospel, we hear Jesus reinterpreting God's law for those who concern themselves with obeying God's law: the Pharisees, and his followers.

Jesus teaches them in the hopes of redirecting attention away from obedience to the law in the old way toward the obedience and embodiment of the law in a new way. He himself was a manifestation of this new way of interpreting the law.

Jesus teaches that God is more concerned with what springs forth, (or spews forth), from the heart. What makes us clean or unclean has to do with the disposition of our hearts and how this shows up in what we say and what we do.

I imagine that everyone in this story is doing their best to be faithful. Jesus, once again, is challenging what it means to be obedient and faithful to God.

And then the Canaanite woman breaks onto the scene and pulls this very message out to an ever widening audience, the Gentiles. She herself is a Gentile, 'unclean,' and yet, she recognizes Jesus for who he is, Son of David, and what he means for all people. And she begs Jesus for mercy.

In this exchange, she has not only shown her faithfulness and perseverance, but she's sped up the movement to widen the message of God's love beyond the Lost Sheep of Israel.

The Canaanite woman is an outsider of the community that has gathered in this scene. She's from a people and a place that Israel had conquered and oppressed. How radical that a person from the 'outside' is the bearer and embodiment of this message!

As my former spiritual director, Joyce McFarland used to say, "This REEKS of God!"

We could stop here, with this big bite of the Good News, but if we did, we wouldn't have a chance to let this story become afresh for us in our own bodies.

Let's take some time to chew on it this morning.

I'd like us to take a moment to do some Visio Divina.

Visio Divinia means 'divine seeing' in Latin. This is similar to Lectio Divina, the practice of dwelling in scripture, but rather than with our ears, we will use our eyes. Think of this as praying with your eyes, inviting God to speak to you through an image to gain new insight and wisdom.

I have a different image I'd like to share with you.

I ask everyone to please close your eyes for moment and clear what's in your mind's eye.

Image Credit: Ally Barrett, "The Crumby Dog"

Now open your eyes and gaze upon the image.

Take a moment and let your eyes go where they want to.

Notice what stands out to you or what you are curious about.

Look at the people in the image.

How do they relate to one another?

What is the relationship between these people?

Which person are you drawn to?

Close your eyes again and listen with your heart.

What might God be inviting in you to wonder or notice about yourself or a relationship you are in?

What have you learned without words, about this story and yourself by gazing upon this image?

What have you been gifted?

Now let's go ahead and share with one another for a moment if you like. Introverts, it's ok to sit in silence if you'd like. Extroverts - let's please respect the introverts in the room.

And now let's give thanks for what God brought forth in this exercise. Amen!

At St. John's, we talk about the values of sacredness, belonging, nourishment, creativity, and transformation.

This is where transformation begins…by centering in the heart, with The Holy One, and responding from this place.

I now want to offer you another image of this text to set your heart's gaze upon:

Please close your eyes one last time.

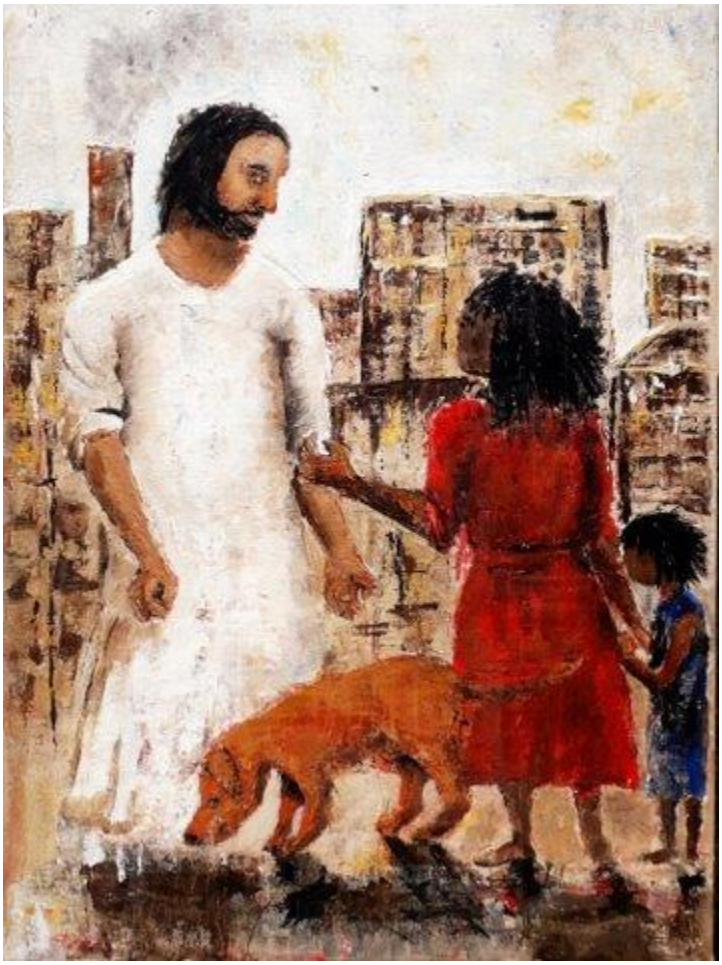


Image Credit:
Ally Barrett, "The One with the Crumby Dog" (urban version)

Now what do you see?

What I see and hear with the ear of my heart is the challenge to me to always keep looking out to the edges of the fabric of our community.

I see the woman I've seen on my drive to church from my neighborhood in Northeast Minneapolis. She's on Broadway, right where Northeast and North Minneapolis meet. She is crossing lanes of traffic, wearing her Hijab, with a child on her back, in the blazing heat, asking for money. Their eyes beg for mercy.

I imagine this woman on Broadway has no papers, no status to speak of in this country. I know there is no government program for her and her child. It's as if she doesn't exist. People turn their gaze from her and wish for the traffic light to change. I am wondering if I will too.

Does the God I worship have room for this woman and her child?

As a follower of Jesus, do I?

She has a name. Will I speak it aloud, hold it in my heart, and make her presence known to the world? What bit of the Good News am I being invited to share with her today? What bit of Good News might she offer to me today?

At St. John's, when we speak of transformation, we acknowledge that we are healers in need of God's healing, forgiveness, and liberation, personally and systemically.

This is a mutual endeavor, healing and being healed, where we are bound up with God and with one another.

This is the life Jesus invites his followers to…in our own lives, in our relationships, in this congregation, in our community.

Our very work together as the church, this congregation and everyone here present, is to do just that.

John Paul Meier, Biblical scholar, and Catholic priest, in his interpretation of this passage, said,

> "If the great commission is ever fulfilled, it will mean not the imperialistic triumph of the present form of the church but rather its death, followed by the resurrection of a genuine world-church, catholic in a sense we can hardly dream of. The one thing that would remain the same would be the church's Lord: the Son of David who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is already at work in Tyre and Sidon; we obtuse disciples have yet to catch up."

Meier wrote these words in 1986, 37 years ago.

Perhaps we too have taken the law and contorted it and created a barrier between ourselves, our God, and all of God's people. What if it we, the church itself, whose members are debating about what being faithful and obedient looks like are not turning over our own shoulders to see who is bothering us by begging for God's mercy?

What happens when we widen our lens and extend our reach, just as God invites us to through the Canaanite woman in this text?

What if we were less about purity of faith, which separates us from God and one another and more about holiness, which is about being one with God and one another?

Our future as a congregation and as a denomination has everything to do with how well we make our life together IN HERE to be people sent OUT THERE, into the world, into our own lives and communities.

How long will it take for the death and resurrection that Meier speaks of?

I imagine that there are many small deaths and resurrections taking place all the time, because Christ is renewing us and his church at every single moment.

How are we at St. John's in the lifecycle of this faith community being made new again? What is emerging? What are we being invited to let go of? What are we being invited to carry forward?

How will we cooperate and conspire in what is being cast down and what is being raised up by God?

How will we, as St. John the Baptist Minneapolis continue to give witness to God's love through the actions of our own lives from what stems from our hearts?

The journey in continuing to ask this question IS the journey of faith, a journey we make together, and with God's help.

Let us pray:

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look
favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred
mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry
out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world
see and know that things which were being cast down are being
raised up, and things which had grown old are being made
new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection
by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus
Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity
of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.