

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
 August 14, 2011, Matthew 15:21-28
 The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us Pray: Breathe on us, O God, that we may be filled with your Spirit - and led by your living word – Jesus Christ our Lord. Bless the word of my lips and the meditations of our hearts. We ask it in his name. Amen.

Some of you may remember when Val Tutson was here a few years ago – Val is an internationally known storyteller and we were blessed to have her with us for a weekend. We heard stories from South Africa at a dinner on Saturday night and at our Sunday morning worship she told the story of the Last Supper there in the Upper Room from the vantage point of a child who lived in the house. While we all know that story so well, we heard it in a new way – I know I came away with a new appreciation, a new understanding, new insights of that dark night when Jesus gathered with his disciples for that special meal.

Stories can do that, don't they – they open our imaginations to hear a Bible passage in a new way, often from a different perspective, maybe getting a new and clearer understanding of what God is saying to us.

Today I offer to you such a story based on our gospel reading this morning – told from the vantage point of one of the disciples present that day - and I hope you will ask yourselves, what was the event really like? What were the people in it thinking about? What happened and why did it happen that way? How is God found here? And what relevance does it have to our lives today? Let your imagination go!

So, let's enter into the scene: may God bless our insights and understanding: may the Holy Spirit help us to hear what it is God is saying.

She didn't belong there. I knew it and the rest of us knew it. We were just sitting down to dinner when she barged in.

The dogs woke up immediately and from their place under the table they began to bark.

One of the children started to cry as the woman frantically looked around the room.

I was startled and I stood up immediately. I could feel myself beginning to get angry as I look at this dishevelled and dirty woman. John and James, who had been sitting near the door had leapt up at the same time I had - and they were already reaching out to stop from the woman from coming closer to the table when she spotted the master.

"Lord, Son of David" - she cried out as they moved in front of her, "Have mercy on me! My daughter is sick. She is suffering terribly from demon possession..."

The master must of heard her over the noise of the two dogs and the child, but he never said a word. He didn't even look up from his plate. By this time not only John and James, but I and three others had surrounded the woman and we began to hustle her out the door. She was interrupting not only our meal, but the

time that Jesus had specially set aside for teaching us about the Kingdom he was going to establish. We had no intention of letting her get in the way of that.

The woman struggled a bit, but she didn't have a chance. Hauling nets gives a person a lot of strength, and she was outnumbered. We got her outside even more quickly than a bouncer gets a drunk out of a tavern.

But let me tell you, once outside, she caused just as much trouble as a drunk does. She was loud and insistent. She tried to get by us and to get back inside. She kept on saying to us that she had to see the miracle worker, that her daughter was in terrible shape, that she needed help. She must have clutched at and grabbed each and every one of us as she pleaded.

I tell you, she was a real pain. I just wanted to get back inside for dinner.

James tried to reason with her. "Look", he said, "You have no right to be here. You've got no right to bother the teacher. You are a foreigner, you don't believe in anything we believe in, your people are gentiles, they are heathens, and your behavior shows that you are too. There is no way the master is going to help you, so please go away."

"I've got to see him", she said, "I know he can help me. He has done so much for others."

"That may be", James said, "but he's not going to do anything for you. You are not only a woman, you are a Canaanite, You don't go to the synagogue, You don't obey the law of Moses, You are unclean, You eat forbidden food. To make matters worse... you have absolutely no respect. Jesus is trying to eat. He is a guest in another man's home, and this is supposed to be a special time for us all, and you just barge in and start demanding help! Listen to me! Please! Go away! You are not going to get help here."

You know what she did?

That wretched woman just shook her head and said, "I know he will help me, he's got to help me!"

John butted in, "Look", he said, "Go away. We've told you that you're not welcome here. We've told you that Jesus isn't going to have anything to do with your type. So why don't you just get lost."

I tell you she was a crazy woman. She didn't know her place, that's for sure. The more we said to her, the louder and more persistent she was. She cried, she begged, she screamed. There was no reasoning with her.

After a few minutes of this I got the idea of asking Jesus to tell her to go away. I figured that if he said something to her she'd get the picture and stop her infernal racket. I mentioned the idea to a couple of the others and they agreed that it was the only thing to do if we were going to have any peace.

As soon as I opened the door to go in the dogs began barking again. Someone hissed at them to be quiet as I went over to Jesus. He was sitting with the child who had cried earlier and eating and talking with our host. Our host looked a little embarrassed. He was trying to pretend that nothing was going on - but the woman was standing just outside the open door where my two mates were waiting for the word and the noise level was none too low.

"Excuse me", I said to the Master, "could you please tell that woman to go away. She is really pestering us with all her crying and carrying on."

Jesus look at his host, then at me, and said -- "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." -- I tell you, Jesus was really frustrating at times. He never seemed to give a straight answer to a simple question. But even so, this time he was backing us up. It was like he had heard everything we had said to the woman, so I turned to tell the wretched woman that the master had told her to go away.

Just as I was turning around, she squeezed by the guys at the door and ran over to right beside the master, and fell on down on her knees at his feet. "Lord, help me", she said.

I didn't do a thing. I was tired. I figured after what he had said Jesus would handle it just fine. And he did. Jesus looked at her at his feet. She bowed her head and looked down.

Then he looked around the room for a moment. The child beside him was busy eating a piece of bread as if nothing untoward had happened. The dogs were nuzzling around under the table. Our host was staring at him, no doubt wondering what Jesus was going to do to get rid of this problem.

John and James and the others were all inside by this point. They were still standing, waiting to see if they were going to be needed again. It became very quiet in the room as the master looked around, the only sounds were those of the flies and of the child eating.

Then Jesus looked down at the woman and said to her, "It is not right to take the children's bread and to toss it to their dogs" --

A couple of the disciples smiled. I must confess that I grinned too. It was such a well turned phrase. The kind that only Jesus seemed to be able to come up with. It made the point well. As far as I was concerned, it certainly disposed of her and all of her kind.

I caught James looking at me and began to nod my head at him. As I did so the woman looked up at Jesus and stared him in the eyes. "Yes Lord", she said to him in this incredibly calm and clear voice, and I swear to you she had this little smile on her face,

"Yes Lord", she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

I was stunned. The woman really was too much. Lippy, rude, obnoxious, unclean, disrespectful, I could go on!

Anyway - do you know what Jesus did? He smiled at her, as if it was all some great contest of wits and he said to her, "Woman, you have great faith, For your reply, your request is granted. Go home, your daughter is healed"

I just could not understand it. I mean why in the world did Jesus do that? She did not belong there. She was not one of us. She was nothing but a Canaanite. Jesus knew it, I knew it, and the rest of us knew it.

I just don't understand Jesus sometimes.

I just don't understand....

Let us pray:

Holy God, help us to understand. Loving Lord, help us to understand that there is not one of us who deserves even the crumbs that fall from Your table -- yet you grant to us all: Jew and Gentile - young and old - rich and poor - black white - male or female - sinner and saint - the bread of life.

Loving God, help us to not only understand, but to pass your love on to others. Give us eyes to see you, ears to hear you, hearts to love you, lips to proclaim you, and hands to serve you.

Lord God, we erect so many barriers as individuals and as a society. We shut others out and disbar ourselves by how we react to the words of our neighbors. We pray give us the energy and the will to tear down the walls that divide us from one another and from you... give us the courage to expand the circle.

Lord, hear our prayer...Amen.

*adapted from a resource written by the Rev. Richard J. Fairchild

MORNING PRAYER written by Patricia Gantuah:

Dear, God,

Thank you for our families, friends, and for all the blessings, both big and small that you pour out on us each day. We are grateful for your love.

We have been preoccupied with endless activities, so busy that there's no room in our cluttered lives for your spirit. Our sins have caused us to hide from you but to what avail can we try to elude you? We have come to the realization that we need you in every part of our lives. Without you directing our steps, we can do nothing but wander a world of disappointments and failures. But with you, there is joy and there is love. With you, we are everything we should be, everything we are capable of being.

We ask you, Dear Lord, let each one of us feel your love, comfort and presence in our lives now and every day. Let us not forget those who can't be here with us today. We give thanks to you for them too. We ask that you comfort those who mourn especially the families and friends of Claire Blauvelt, Sally Burkat, and Ruth Heindel.

Be merciful to the homeless, jobless and those struggling to keep their lives together. Stay with the lonely, the widowed, the orphans, the elderly, sick and bedridden and all who call upon you. Enable us to give ourselves compassionately in bringing joy, peace, and hope to others. Calm our troubled minds and restless spirits – grant us true inner peace. Dismiss our fears, anxieties, and insecurities. Restore hearts that have strayed from you.

We know Lord, that this life is not all there is, that the best is yet to come if we live for you. So, help us each day to live our lives in ways that honor and please you. And we'll not forget to give you all the praise and glory. Bless us in Jesus' name. Amen.