

The Church of the Good Shepherd
Lexington, Kentucky
Sermon for August 14, 2011 ~ Proper 15a
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Have you ever thought of how it would feel to be cut off from the rest of the world? Cut off from the highways of commerce? Cut off from other persons who shared similar needs and aspirations? Imagine, if you can, what your life would be like if you were isolated from everyone else. Or, imagine what our life together would be like if we as a nation were cut off from other nations, or if this congregation were cut off from the rest of Christ's Church.

Human history has shown that whenever a person or a group is isolated either by accident or intent, the response is inevitably either a terrible loneliness or a narrow-minded, arrogant parochialism which condemns everyone else. I have always believed that the most judgmental, self-righteous, bigoted people I've known were really people who were that way because they felt left out or cut off or shoved aside. What they really wanted was acceptance and affirmation. Usually, in their desperate attempts to recover it they developed patterns of behavior that propelled them farther away from what they really sought.

The same sort of thing can be true in the realm of the Christian faith. People can try to operate on faith as if their faith has nothing to do with anybody else's. When they do, what faith they have usually withers or stagnates or becomes a sort of experience of self-worship. The truth of the matter is that faith, when cut off, is not really faith at all because it must be shared.

Consider Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman. Here was a woman with a sick daughter, cut off from Jesus by a well-developed, centuries-old, race prejudice. Here was Jesus, sent by God to bring salvation to the chosen race and through them to the rest of the world, cut off from the woman by the religious traditions of his time.

Jesus had left his own land. He was now in the gentile world. This was a new occasion, fraught with meaning and possibility. Perhaps he was seeking rest. Perhaps he was driven into semi-exile by Herod and the hate of the religious establishment. Maybe he was there to think thought the course he would take now that he had broken "the tradition." Or, it could have been for all of these reasons that he withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.

He must have felt a great conflict within himself when this woman came to him expressing a faith he had longed to see among his own kinsmen. Some expositors believe that his initial silence and then his harsh reply were the outward sign of this inward bafflement and struggle.

Then, in one of the most poignant scenes of the gospels, the spell which had been brooding over Jesus is broken as this mother, kneeling at his feet, told him that even the leftovers of God's grace could feed a heart that is hungry. And we see in his joyous response to her faith one of the most beautiful expressions of the good news that God's love is for everyone who asks for it in faith. Estrangement cannot stand the power of faith. The gulf that had separated these two people was spanned by faith.

Faith that is faith never exists in isolation. Faith must be shared. It must find expression. It must exist in the human community. Faith that is faith must act with an expectancy that hopes great things. Such faith is the passport into the kingdom of heaven.

When we hear the call of God's love, the appropriate response is always that of faith. It is not only a call into a creative and adventuresome relationship with the lover of our souls, but also a call to express that relationship in the context of Christian community. We are Baptized not into isolation but into community.

The thread that binds today's lessons is the theme of the universal love and mercy of God. It is that love and mercy that is expressed in the story of Joseph and his brothers. St. Paul writes that through the mercy of God, salvation will be his and everyone's regardless of nationality or race for God desires to be merciful to all. And, in Jesus' response to the plea of the Canaanite woman, we see an overture of healing power that made him, a son of Israel, one in spirit with a child of faith of an alien race.

This universalism in its most extravagant form is at the very heart of the Christian mission for it is the bias of the gospel that every group on the face of the earth has the inalienable right to have the opportunity to follow Jesus Christ. Nobody has to be cut off. Nobody has to be isolated. Nobody has to be outside the realm of God's concern or the fellowship of believers.

God has given us the Eucharist as a pledge of universal love. The table is set. In the words of the old prayer of humble access, "We are not worthy to gather up the crumbs under (his) table." But the good news is, it is not our worthiness that entitles us to partake of this banquet but God's worthiness, God's faithfulness, God's mercy. The grace of the sacrament is sure and real. By these mercies we are fed, we are nourished, we are strengthened as individuals and as members of one another. Healing and wholeness can be ours, as it was for the Canaanite woman and her daughter, when we kneel before him with the simple prayer of faith, "Lord, help me."