

Jeff's reflection -Sept 5

Today's Gospel reading contains a surprise – the kind of surprise we should expect when we are talking about God.

Since this is a story about Jesus, we might expect that if God is going to speak in this story, God will speak through Jesus. Instead, God speaks through a woman who intrudes on Jesus' attempt to get some privacy.

After another of his confrontations with Pharisees and scribes, Jesus makes a somewhat unusual journey – he goes to the region of Tyre. Tyre took him outside of the region of Galilee. In fact it took him to coast of the Mediterranean Sea, into a region inhabited by Gentiles, not by Jews.

Arriving in Tyre, he enters a house. We are not told whose house, but we are told that he did not want anyone to know that he was there. Perhaps he just needed a break from the crowds, from the requests, from the criticisms of the scribes and Pharisees.

But even here, Jesus is noticed and recognized. A woman comes to see Jesus. She comes because her daughter is not well. We are told that the 'little daughter' has an unclean spirit. We are not told what that means, but we can imagine that the mother is anxious for her little girl who is suffering. So, the mother comes to ask Jesus to help, because she has heard stories of Jesus healing people in the Jewish territories.

But she is not a Jew. She is a Gentile. The writer of Mark's Gospel says she is a woman of Syrophenician, a region north of Israel. The writer of Matthew's gospel describes her as a Canaanite woman. She enters this house and she 'begs', implores Jesus to help her, to cast the demon out of her daughter, to give her little girl back her life.

But this story about Jesus the healer is not like this Gospel's previous stories about Jesus the healer...

Because this time Jesus does not offer healing, but dismissal.

Jesus says to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

The imagery is clear. The children are the Jews. The Gentiles are the dogs.

Jesus says to this woman, 'My first responsibility is to the people of the covenant, to my people, to the Jewish people. It would not be right, it would not be fair to deprive them, to take food meant for the children and give it to dogs.'

As he spoke, Jesus may have recalled giving food to the children in the wilderness. Earlier in Mark's Gospel Jesus had fed over 5,000 people in the wilderness, and after everyone had eaten they collected up 12 baskets of leftovers – twelve, perhaps

symbolical of the 12 sons of Jacob after whom the 12 tribes of Israel were named.

The food is the gift of life given, provided by God, and somehow this gift of life flowed through Jesus. This woman, not one who belongs to the 12 tribes, has asked for that life.

And Jesus has responded with a reply that seems to say, 'Sorry, but you're not in my constituency, you're not one of my people, your problem falls outside of my job description.'

Jesus has spoken...and now God speaks!

God speaks through this woman, this Gentile woman, through her courage as she dares respond, through her love for her child, a love that refuses to be silenced.

The woman speaks again, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

She remains respectful – referring to Jesus as 'sir' and she is imaginative enough to stay with the image Jesus has used:

'Feed the children' – yes – but the children never eat every morsel of food, some crumbs always fall from the table, and those crumbs, those crumbs are food, even for the dogs.'

The woman speaks. God speaks, as God often speaks, beginning with the word 'But'. That word 'but' was common to prophets who declared, "This is how things are ...BUT... this is not how things have to be."

It is a word that does not appear in the words of today's reading from Psalm 146, but the implication of that word 'but' is present.

The Psalmist declares what everyone knows, that the world is run by the powerful, the elite, those the writer calls 'princes'; the ones who control and run the world, manage the economy, the resources, the people.

That's how the world seems to work...but..."DO NOT put your trust in princes," says the Psalmist, because they are mortal and one day even the princes will die, and with them will die their power and plans.

Instead, says the Psalmist, trust in God. It is God who remains, it is God who has the power to create, it is God who gives life.

It is God's world, and God has a different agenda than the power-brokers of the world. God, says the Psalmist, executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets the prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are

bowed down. God loves the righteous, and God also watches over the strangers. God upholds the orphan and the widow.

This is God who responded to the suffering cries of the people enslaved in Egypt; people who did not cry out to God but who just cried out with the pain of oppressed people. God responded to those who cried out, sending Moses to lead them through a wilderness to become a new people.

As Jesus heard the words of this stranger, this woman bowed down by her concern for her daughter ...as Jesus heard the words of this woman, did Jesus hear again the words of the Psalmist, did Jesus hear again the word of God, the God whose love is not restricted or withheld from any who break the silence and cry out?

God speaks through this courageous woman, speaks to declare that the life-giving presence of God, flowing through Jesus, is not limited to any one community of people. When all seem to have been fed, there will still be more, even if only crumbs, enough to fill 12 baskets of leftovers, enough to also feed the others whom some dismiss as dogs!

Jesus says this woman is not included in the children whom he feeds, BUT...BUT then the woman speaks, Jesus hears God speak through her, and Jesus says, "For saying what you have said, you may go – the demon has left your daughter."

The woman leaves, but her words, her actions, her courage...do not leave. They stay with Jesus, and now he is thinking about that food, and those crumbs.

And so he goes again to an unexpected place. He goes to the region of the Decapolis, named for being a region of ten Greek cities. Jesus goes deeper into the Gentile world.

Here he heals a man who cannot hear and cannot speak – heals following his encounter with a woman who broke the silence in order to speak, and in doing so allowed Jesus to hear a word from God.

And Jesus again feeds a multitude. This time at least 4,000 people – 4,000 Gentiles. And this time they collect seven baskets full of leftovers, of the crumbs that fell from the banquet. Seven – a number perhaps symbolizing the seven nations that those former slaves from Egypt had displaced when they came to their land of promise. Perhaps now Jesus knew that both the people of the 12 baskets and the people of the seven baskets were to be fed, that God watched over all of them, that God loved all of them.

Mark's Gospel was probably written at least 40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. By that time, faith communities – churches – were gathering in many places, seeking to create communities grounded in the teachings and spirit of Jesus. By that time, those early churches were communities of Jews and Gentiles.

The writer of this Gospel knew that these new communities were shaped by the spirit of Christ.

I think we resist any suggestion that Jesus might have changed his mind, that this woman might have taught him about God. We want to think that Jesus knew everything, that he had written the textbook on God, that he had a script that detailed everything he needed to know about God.

This story challenges us to accept that Jesus didn't carry a script about God, but understood that he was part of God's story that was still being written – written in the world and in his own heart. Jesus shows us that God's love will always be deeper and more extensive than we imagine, and so a major aspect of faith is to allow God to stretch us so that we reimagine the world the way the writer of Psalm 146 reimagined the world:

That when we allow ourselves the risk of trusting that strangers, people different than us – that people who do not look, behave, worship or speak like us - may speak a word of God to us:

That we attune ourselves to the cries of those who are oppressed, hungry, those pushed down in need of being lifted-up – for God listens and responds to those cries.

It means God will continually be speaking to us to expand our circle of love to embrace more and more as neighbours and children of God.

It means that we never can say 'this is the church', for how we 'be' church, how we organize church, how church looks and 'is' in this world may be changed and shaped by the ever newly uttered word of God.

After all, we are children of God – and when we are talking about God, we should expect some surprises.

Praise be to God.

AMEN