

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 15, Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

August 17th, 2008

***Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California***

The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

Faith in the Raw

We all know that Episcopalians tease one another sometimes about being the "frozen chosen." Perhaps in the increasingly post-denominational age we live now, that moniker is starting to wear a bit thin. Perhaps our rubbing shoulders and standing with the marginalized over the past few decades, of daring some radical stands against the status quo, have begun to thaw us out here and there. I certainly hope so.

But, you know what? We still love our liturgy, our poetic words, our carefully crafted prayers and orderly, generally well-mannered way of doing Christian business. We are institution builders and keepers in a largely anti-institutional age. And we, often without saying it (heaven forbid that we be rude!) sniff at some of our brothers and sisters with their raw, unrehearsed prayers and charismatic, uncouth ways of being with God. We have a constitutional disdain for the half-baked theologies and less thoughtful assertions about what God is like. In our worst moments, we fear God might be turned off by such lack of sophistication.

I'm just as bad on this score as any Episcopalian I know. I adore order. I can name a few typos that jump out at me – well, at least one – when we read from the prayer book. Just this morning I was exchanging e-mails with our Senior Warden about whether or not parish office and governing body titles should be capitalized! I thrive in our own special Anglican purity code of sorts, and while my rude, more earthy Midwestern side sometimes rears its embarrassing head, I love to cultivate my more polite and proper English side. And even half-tongue- in-cheek I tell you it was good for that side of me that I married someone from Japan!

And then I come face-to-face with today's Gospel and have to chuckle at myself. I catch myself saying yet again: the Jesus we want is rarely the Jesus we get.

Matthew's largely Jewish-Christian audience would have understood – and probably would have shared with us some shock – at the underlying themes of today's Gospel: purity and tribal identity.

Then there are two questions so fundamental that they leap out of the story and are writ large for the human family:

What exactly is it that sullies our lives and relationships...and to whom does the Gospel belong?

But for me, and perhaps for you, too, the most challenging piece of this Gospel is how Jesus behaves. He berates the Pharisees for their obsession with cleanliness and talks the less savory aspects of human digestion and the sewer. He then turns around and insults a Canaanite woman with one of the worst imaginable put-downs. Dogs, after all, were filthy to faithful, first-century Judaism.

Jesus initially paints the Canaanite woman out with the sort of red-neck bigotry that most of us would like to believe belongs to somebody else...not to us...and certainly not to our beloved Christ. This is not a "pastoral"

moment. I'm not even sure that it's a "teaching moment," either. Some interpreters temper the passage by asserting that Jesus is teaching his disciples by the rough way he appears to handle the Canaanite woman.

But I think we mistakenly and rather selfishly want our Messiah fully formed out of the gate, a Christ who is pristine and utterly spotless from the manger to the cross. A good Episcopalian, well-reared Jesus. Classic Christian teaching is that Jesus was sinless, but does that mean he never learned anything, or his heart was never bent or even grown through his encounters? Does that mean he should be "nice" the way we would want him to be nice? I don't know the full answers to these questions. I leave them to you to ponder with me.

In any case, Jesus quotes the cultural and, indeed tribal, playbook of his day to this heathen woman. And she boldly comes right back at him with a retort that puts all his disciples to shame for its wit, passion, and utter nerve.

Maybe Jesus is astonished. Maybe God in Christ wonders at the joy of surprise when a created being dares directly challenge the divine. But in any case, Jesus commends her faith.

The disciples, we've just seen, want everything explained, sorted, and understood. But the Canaanite woman wants the raw, unrefined stuff: healing for her daughter. The disciples have left everything to follow Jesus. They are the faithful churchgoers in their own way, the committed volunteers, maybe even the devoted hired hands. But this Canaanite woman makes no promises and seems to disappear from the scene as rapidly as she arrived once she gets what she came for. She doesn't even become a pledging member!

Yet it is her faith that Christ commends.

Does this take you faithful regulars down a few notches? It does me. Faith, it seems, belongs to many who rarely, if ever, show up in a pew. This Canaanite woman was an outsider's outsider -- the worst of the rabble. The disciples, doubtless, were cheering Jesus on when he calls her a dog.

But it is what comes from her heart that matters, and maybe this commends something to our prayer life and spiritual life, too. She rough-houses with God in Christ verbally. She demands what she wants. The Gospel belongs to her, too. It's raw, not-so-nice prayer, like "Oh, God!" and probably includes the sorts you wouldn't want to hear your Rector say on a Sunday morning! Those demands on the Holy One we stubbornly assert when we're desperate, at our wit's end, or simply upset. Those naked cries for help when a sophisticated, erudite, poetic prayer cannot capture the raw need or emotion of the moment. The impure demands on God from our sullied hearts.

Then we are the Canaanite woman, outsiders all, raw and uncouth before our God. Our purity of language, prayer, and liturgy isn't as important to God as our rough-and-tumble humanity, the children inside the Creator wants to reach.

For us faithful regulars, it's faith in the raw that God in Christ seeks out in us, for then we can at last set aside the blindness of our pride and see our God -- perhaps even face to face.

Amen.