

“Tenacious Faith”

August 23, 2020

Matthew 15: 21-28

Tony Campolo, popular speaker, author, spiritual advisor, and Baptist preacher who is a leader in what is known as the Red Letter Christian Movement which aims to put emphasis on the teachings of Jesus, shared a story about a friend of his. This friend told the story about how he had once counseled a man who identified his problem as falling out of love with his wife. Tony Campolo says: “My friend advised the man to think about his wife’s needs rather than his own wants; think of all the ways he could make life happier for his wife, and then go home and try doing them. I love this story because it challenges our predisposition in this culture towards selfish individualism. The man seeking marriage counseling went home and did as instructed. A few days later my friend received a phone call in which the husband related the following:

“Every day I leave for work, put in a hard day, come home dirty and sweaty, stumble in the back door, go to the refrigerator, get something to drink, and then go into the family room and watch television until supper time. After talking to you, I decided I would do better than that in the future. So yesterday, before I left work, I showered and shaved and put on a clean shirt. On the way home I stopped at the florist and bought a bouquet of roses. Instead of going in the back door as I usually do, I went to the front door and rang the doorbell. My wife opened the door, took one look at me, and started to cry. When I asked her what was wrong she said, ‘It’s been a horrible day.

First Billy broke his leg and had to have it put in a cast. I no sooner returned home from the urgent care when your mother called and told me that she is coming to stay for three weeks. I tried to do the wash and the washing machine broke and there is water all over the basement floor. And now you have to come home drunk!”

Change. It is not easy for us to change nor is it easy for us to accept change in others. And this morning’s scripture reading is especially difficult because it is about a change which occurs in Jesus.

#### Prayer for Understanding

Inclusive God, always available to those who seek you, be present with us through all we would now read and speak. May your word filter through all the other words that come from our culture, our upbringing, our prejudices, to broaden our vision and expand our capacity for compassion. May your word make us whole and unite us in mutual learning and service for the sake of all your children. Amen.

#### Read Matthew 15: 21-28

“Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.” Where was “that place” which Jesus has just left? That place was around the Sea of Galilee. His home turf. In fact, Jesus has just fed more than 5000 people by the Sea of Galilee. After being host to a massive picnic, he walked on the water to climb in a boat with the disciples during a torrential storm. I’d say a pretty good day’s work – feeding 5000, walking on water during a thunderstorm and then stilling the violent waves and wind. And if that wasn’t enough, the scribes and Pharisees approach Jesus attempting to trap him by arguing theology, Jewish doctrine about table etiquette; more specifically the

washing of hands. Really? It is a diversion tactic because what they are really concerned about is maintaining their power over the people. That power is dissipating as Jesus' popularity with the crowds is growing. Perhaps fed up with the ensuing conflict with the religious leaders, Jesus leaves the geographical area which is most comfortable and familiar for him, and he journeys to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Tyre is populated by mostly Gentiles – non Jews – the folks which the Jewish law instructs any self-respecting Jew to avoid. Jesus is clearly stepping over the Jewish line by journeying to the land of the Gentiles. Up until this point, Jesus' ministry has been solely among his people – the Jews.

A Canaanite woman from Tyre – or in Mark's gospel she is identified as a Syrophonecian woman - approaches Jesus, begging him to ease her daughter's torment by casting a demon out of her. She is a foreigner and she is a woman; it would have been customary for a male member of this girl's family to approach Jesus to request the healing. I don't think we should underestimate this woman's boldness and courage in stepping outside the accepted norms and traditions of society. She obviously has heard of Jesus' ability to heal and to save and she is going to step all over tradition in order to secure that healing for her daughter.

We would expect our kind and loving Jesus to say, "Of course I will come and save your daughter," but in this instance Jesus is caught with his compassion down. At first, he ignores her. Jesus' disciples advise him to send her away – sort of like they advised Jesus to send away the hungry multitudes. When she then begs him to help her, he says to her, "Let the children be fed first (meaning the children of Israel – the

Jews), for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs (meaning the Gentiles)." That seems a bit harsh. Jesus is telling this woman, this desperate woman, that his mission is for the Jews and the Jews alone. Now, I have read multiple commentaries about Jesus' response and they, and you and I, would really like to soften his words; justify his harsh response to this desperate woman. But there is just no getting around his response to this woman.

Many who might have felt the bite of Jesus' words and his implied exclusion, might have crept away, feeling small and insignificant, but not the Canaanite woman. She boldly responds, "Sir, even the dogs under that table eat the children's crumbs." Her tenacious faith in Jesus' healing powers – as contrasted with the Jewish religious leaders; the scribes and the Pharisees – takes Jesus by surprise. This foreign woman is challenging his accepted paradigms of the way society and religious institutions are structured; norms which have shaped Jesus' Jewishness, his world view and his understanding up until this point of his ministry.

Jesus' earlier prejudice was very human but his insight now is perhaps divine. He understands instantly her challenge. His mission is not to be restricted to the Jews. God's love expands beyond all human barriers. This woman's struggle is to be heard; it is the struggle of all people to be seen and heard and experience fully God's redemptive, saving love. At this point Jesus' understands that he is the instrument of God's redemptive plan, ushering in a new kingdom which dismisses the idea of any person being excluded. Rather than scolding her for her brashness, Jesus tells her, "Great is your faith! You may go and discover that the demon has left your daughter." With the

physical healing comes a spiritual awakening – not just for the woman and her daughter – but for Jesus. Jesus’ understanding of himself and his ministry has shifted/changed as a result of his encounter with the Canaanite woman. And if Jesus’ understanding of his ministry grows and expands/changes, perhaps ours, as followers of Jesus Christ, is also being challenged to expand and grow to include people we might otherwise exclude.

Change. It is not easy to accept for ourselves or for other people. It requires that we move out of our comfort zones and enter into unfamiliar territory. The boldness and courage of the Canaanite woman opens Jesus up to considering his ministry to be broader than he had at first imagined. He was sent by God to this earth, for all people; the ones we would label as outsider as well as the insiders. God would have Jesus draw his lines in the sand much further out.

My father reminded me of a story I had heard several years ago. It is a story told by a friend of my father’s who retired from the practice of medicine a few years ago, after spending 50 years or more in medicine. In the early years of his career, when he was an internist, he often saw people in a local community clinic; volunteering his time. One day a woman came into the clinic with an injury to her foot; she could barely walk. When he entered the examining room, he asked her to share her story. He could see that there was something wrong with her foot, but he wanted to learn more about her as a whole person. She shared that she was homeless, living under a bridge. She seemed to struggle with communication and being able to focus and respond to his questions. She was unable to work for the same reasons. She had been abandoned by what family she did have. With the heavy rain which had occurred the night before, she

had slipped and twisted her ankle. My father's friend ordered x-rays, but he also took the time to run a few more tests. What he discovered from blood tests was that this woman, who was homeless, no money, no friends, no family, no source of income, was suffering from some sort of blood deficiency, which could be easily countered with drug therapy. He set her foot in a boot and gave her a one-month supply of the drug which he thought might help her and told her to come back to see him in a month. He wasn't sure he would see her again, but she kept her next appointment with him. When he entered the examining room, this time he was face to face with a woman who was wearing clean clothes, had a smile on her face and shared the story of how she had felt so much better she had been able to find a job and get an efficiency room in which to live. As the months went by, she continued to visit the internist on a regular basis and her condition continued to improve. By the time the year came to an end and he could dismiss her as a patient, she had been restored to her family, was working and had a place to live. You would never have known that the year before she had been homeless and desperate. When my father asked his friend how he discovered her disorder, he responded that he took the time to look at her, really look at her, and see that she was a beloved child of God and she could be living a life filled with wholeness and joy.

The Canaanite woman demanded that Jesus look at her, really look at her and hear her plea on behalf of her child. Her faith was tenacious; determined, persistent, stubborn, tough. And Jesus was willing to be opened to the new direction in which God's Spirit was leading him. God calls us to do the same – take the time to look and listen to the people around us.

Jesus will return to Galilee, with a broader vision of what God could and would do through him because of his encounter with this woman – an outsider with tenacious faith.