

Denice Leslie
14th Sunday after Pentecost
August 17, 2008
Matthew 15:21 – 28

“Heal Me Hands of Jesus”



An “engraving above the library of the former monastery of Saint Gall (reads) ‘Enter Here the Pharmacy of the Soul.’”¹

How lovely to see the church as a pharmacy for what ails the soul! Isn’t our prayer that all who enter here will find a balm for their sin sick souls?

Unfortunately all too often we, as the Church, are uncomfortable with the whole idea of the healing ministry. And as a consequence our own sin sick souls continue to ail.

Steven Galipeau, author of *Transforming Body and Soul* writes,

“The church has been reduced to a ministry of visiting the sick instead of one of healing the sick and understanding the meaning of illness.

Certainly, when people are sick at home and in the hospital, it is good to visit and encourage them to get well. But if God is speaking to that person through the illness, then what about helping the person find the voice of God and discover a dimension of healing beyond mere medical restoration?

¹ --Quoted by Martin E. Marty in *Context*, 15 January 91.

At present the church leaves most of its healing work in the hands of other professionals, especially with physical illness. Yet, the healing tradition of Jesus is almost as old as medicine itself.

This ministry should be available to people both inside and outside the church, in order to parallel the ministry of Jesus.”²



Which brings us to today’s gospel lesson about the Canaanite woman who comes beseeching Jesus to heal her daughter.

The words of Jesus are not what we expect, are they? They’re puzzling. They strike us as hurtful and exclusive. At first he doesn’t answer her at all! But after the disciples complain about how annoying she is Jesus finally says to them-not to the woman, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” At this point the woman has pushed her way in front of Jesus and kneeling before him, she implores him, “Lord, help me.”

Jesus response is again one that feels so unlike what we have come to expect of him. He says to her, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Her reply calls him to account when she says, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the

² --Steven A. Galipeau, *Transforming Body and Soul: Therapeutic Wisdom in the Gospel Healing Stories* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 119.

crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” What are we to make of this?

The key to understanding this healing story of Jesus and his words to the Canaanite woman is also the key we need this morning to help us embrace our own ongoing need for the healing sin in our lives so we can be a part of the life-giving, healing ministry of Jesus. How can we begin to get at this story and find good news in it this morning?

Pastor James Harnish shares an insightful story in his book *Joy for the Journey*. He says, “A woman was in my office this week. Together we reflected on what has been happening in the past two years since the day when, in her words, she dragged herself into this church she said she knew she didn’t fit in ... perhaps, she said, because of the sweat suit and tennis shoes she wore every Sunday. She was suffering from a debilitating neuromuscular disease.

(But she persisted)--She kept coming back (to church).

Then one day she came in to see me. She said ...she was ready for war. I didn’t realize that; she opened the conversation by saying that she didn’t see why anybody would have to die to save her.

I don’t know what she expected. Some preachers would probably have kicked her out of the office or tried to set her straight on the theology of the Atonement.

She was surprised when I said, “You’re in good company. There have been good Christian folks for 2,000 years who have had a hard time understanding what it means to say that Jesus died for us. Let’s work on that.”

We worked on it that day, and at the end of the conversation, I told her we could keep working on it. She got into a Disciple Bible Study. She got involved in the life of the church. Now she had to remind me of her physical condition. I had almost forgotten it because within six or eight weeks, it was gone. She was healed.

She said, “I think I’ve figured out what happened. In this church, I received a transfusion of love.” She compared it to a blood transfusion which goes into your body and affects every part of your body; she said she felt that the love which surrounded her here affected her whole being.

I remembered how she had looked back then. As I looked into her face last week, I was overwhelmed with the beauty in her face, the joy which beamed from her eyes.”³

The woman in James Harnish’s story obviously picked up the message that she wasn’t acceptable to those inside the church because of her attire. Yet she persisted in coming back until she finally had courage enough to confront the pastor just as the Canaanite woman confronted Jesus.

The Canaanite woman who comes beseeching Jesus for healing is very much like this woman. She comes seeking healing for her daughter but her quest is much more than that. She’s looking, seeking a way in to the family of God.

Both women come seeking validation in God’s eyes as human beings of sacred worth.

Every one of us has a need to be validated as human beings, as persons of sacred worth. The question is: How much does our need to be validated prevent us from validating others?

Validating ourselves by invalidating others in some way or another is a game we learned to play as adolescents, isn’t it?

Adolescents lack self-confidence, they desire the approval of their peers and so they ban together in little clichés, chose someone they all agree is geeky or who has cooties, or they decide is their enemy and exclude that person from their circle. In doing so they validate themselves by putting someone else down. Maturity over time teaches us the childishness of such behavior—as adults we seek reconciliation

³ --James Harnish, “Joy for the Journey,” Tampa, Fla.,

and forgiveness from one another—we seek to understand one another—right? NOT.

This story of the Canaanite woman is an uncomfortable reminder of that fact. It calls Israel to account for using its status as the Chosen People of God for excluding non-Jews from their circle, and labeling them as unclean and therefore as less than truly human.

Does Jesus believe this? No. His words to the Disciples may be taken in more than one way. His words, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel,” are actually pretty indicting if you think about it.

I wonder if he came to day, would he say the same thing about the church. Don’t we consider ourselves to be the new Chosen People? Don’t we have our list of those whom we consider to be unclean? Our need for healing and the gospel lesson this morning are about what we consider to be clean and unclean.

Just before this story of the Canaanite woman, Jesus is confronted by Pharisees who have come all the way out from Jerusalem to Galilee just to see him. What they see they don’t like. They chastise him because his disciples don’t keep the laws for ritually washing the hands. They are unclean.

Jesus turns the tables on them and chastises them for not keeping the Ten Commandments when he tells them, “And you do not honor your parents!”

Jesus is telling them that God gave Israel Ten Commandments. But the teachers of the people, in their infinite wisdom, began to write commentary on the law to help people do God’s will. Most of those rules define what is clean and unclean.

The result was 613 rules for daily living which ended up being codified in the book of Leviticus and considered as scripture even though God didn’t give all those rules. God’s law vs. man’s rules.

In a single sentence Jesus does away with the authority of a huge chunk of scripture. He can do that because he is the Logos—the Living

Word of God. The Final Word of God by which all other words are to be judged.

His response to the Pharisees is that their word is not God’s word if it is used to oppress and hurt people. God does not exclude others. People exclude others. Originally, Israel was very evangelical and brought in anyone who was willing to affirm the covenant of Israel with God.

There was no one on the permanent “unclean” list. And there was no Leviticus with its endless list of who is clean and unclean when God gave Israel the Torah. But we have our unclean list of unacceptable people don’t we?

Which brings us back to Jesus and the Canaanite woman and his words to her that it’s not right to throw the children’s food to the dogs.

These words clearly tell us that she is not considered apart of the Chosen People--- because she is a gentile. Like us. You and I. We aren’t Jews. Jesus is a Jew. We are gentiles. We are the Canaanite woman. We are or were on the unclean list!

The gospel writer of Matthew puts the words we Christians would expect to hear from Jesus into the mouth of the gentile woman. And he puts words the Jews to whom he was addressing his gospel—what they would expect to hear-- into the mouth of Jesus.

The message Matthew wants the Jews to hear is an assurance Israel God has not abandoned them. They are his first concern, and the gentiles are to come along later in the story of salvation —

The words of the Canaanite woman actually tell us gentiles are important too when she says that even the dogs receive the crumbs that fall from their Master’s table.

The use of the word dogs here is as pets—pets are members of the family—although of a subordinate nature; they have certain rights and privileges. Their masters have certain responsibilities to care for them. We feed and groom and care for our pets, don’t we?

The woman’s words remind Israel that she can’t wait for them to get their act together and repent so Jesus can then turn his attention to other folks. Her need is now and she is a child of God too. And she knows he is her Lord even if Israel is still coming up to speed on that.

So she has every right to ask for healing just as much as Israel. This healing story is a chastisement of Israel for its rejection of the Messiah and its claim of righteous superiority over others.

Israel’s sin is our sin. Israel’s need for healing from Jesus is our need. The Canaanite woman’s insistence on being included reminds us that we, but for the grace of God in Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection were originally on the outside of the gospel looking in. Like those we keep on our unclean list.

I invite you to take a few moments to consider now in what ways you feel you need to be healed in body, mind or spirit, in order to serve God afresh in holiness of living?

You are invited to come forward to receive anointing with oil and healing prayer at one of the three stations the Healing Teams will form here: one at each rail and one here at the center of the chancel step. Healing Teams if you will, please join me now here on the chancel. We will sing the hymn, “When Jesus the Healer Passed Through Galilee.”