

Abundant Life  
Pentecost 14  
August 17, 2008  
Matthew 15: 10-20

### Enlarging Our Hope

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Boy, we sure go a long way to protect our image of Jesus. You know, our image of him as always kind and gentle, the eternally nice guy. Today's Gospel lesson challenges that sickly-sweet image of our Lord. It's hard to deny that Jesus is harsh, even insulting, to the Canaanite woman in our text, but many of the commentators that I read this week in preparation for this sermon were bending over backwards to smooth out Jesus' rough edges and maintain their Sunday School image of him. One author tried to suggest that Jesus isn't really being hard on the desperate woman. This guy said that the Lord is only joking with her, but I suspect that very few things are funny when your daughter is dying. Another scholar thought that maybe Jesus is only testing the woman, but I could never worship a god who tests you and me to find out if we are worthy of a miracle, especially one of such grave importance, and a third genius tried to blame the whole scene on the disciples! It's true that Peter and the guys tell their teacher that the Canaanite is driving them nuts, but Jesus, alone, is responsible for how he talks to her.

Why is it so hard for us to admit that Jesus had a bad day, or even a bad minute? I mean, Christians confess all the time in the Nicene Creed that Jesus is fully God and fully human. What do we think that means?! If the Son of God truly became one of us, then sometimes he is going to react the way we would to a pushy, needy mom. Maybe the answer to the Lord's cranky attitude is as simple as the fact that Jesus had a headache that

day, or maybe he had a stone in his sandals. Sometimes you and I do gymnastics to maintain the picture of the god we want instead of trusting in the God that is.

I also think there's another possibility. Jesus is a product of his culture. See, this story takes place outside of Israel, some 25 miles north of Galilee, somewhere between the cities of Tyre and Sidon. First-century Jews were indoctrinated from birth to believe that they were far superior to all of their polytheistic neighbors, and of course, women were always "less than" in their male-dominated world. So of course the disciples look down on this annoying woman. It's how they were raised. It's not much of a stretch to believe that Jesus bought into this local prejudice, at least for a moment. After all, he was a Nazarene, too.

When the Lord calls the lady a dog, we should not picture our own playful house pets. In Jesus' day, dogs were the mangy, disease-ridden creatures that roamed the streets in search of food. Dogs competed with ordinary people to survive, and nobody ever kept them as pets. Like it or not, Jesus' words here are a racial slur, an insult that Jews often called people of no account, but this tough woman is undeterred. She argues with the Teacher, the way any one of us would if our child's life were on the line. In fact, I love how combative she is. I think that the Canaanite woman is a great role model for prayer. These days we have domesticated prayer into these polite words that we say in church or over meals. But if Jesus really is our powerful friend, if we believe that He can change the world, and if we believe that He loves us with all of his heart, then shouldn't we pour out our hearts to him? I don't know about yours, but sometimes my heart is messy and angry and disjointed. I can't always put my prayers into neat, poetic phrases, and we shouldn't have to, if we are truly among friends. This mother is an example of the kind of passionate, persistent prayer that we all are allowed to pray. Don't worry. Jesus can take it.

Not only can Jesus take it, but his is moved and changed by this woman's appeal. How cool is that?! I know, our Sunday School theology teaches that "God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow." But it's God's love that never changes. How that love is expressed changes all the time, because needs change and the world changes. Do you really want a god that is set in stone and unmoved by the cries of civilians dying in the former soviet-block country of Georgia? I don't. This powerful story is evidence that the Lord of Creation is in relationship with us. God is moved and changed by what happens to you and me. In the end, Jesus does cross boundaries. He rejects his inbred Jewish prejudices, and hears the woman out. I think he likes the fact that she is a boundary-crosser too, willing to argue with a Jewish rabbi as an equal. At this moment Jesus expands his ministry not just to Jews but to the world, and he heals her daughter with a word. This is not just Good News. It is great news! In fact, if we couldn't ever change God's mind, there wouldn't be much point in praying.

Pastor William Wilimon writes, "I was with her as her pastor from the first diagnosis of her cancer through the difficult therapy. A couple of times a week, I visited her, and we prayed for healing. We prayed earnestly week after week. "I still have hope that I'll be healed," she said. Then one day when I entered her hospital room I could tell that she had a sense of great serenity and peace. She seemed somehow stronger, as if she felt better. I hoped that her treatments were at last being effective. No, she said, that was not the case. But she was better, spiritually. She explained to me, "Earlier I prayed for healing; now I just want to be with God no matter what. That's what I hope for. I haven't given up hope; I have enlarged my hope."

Jesus enlarges our hope in this text. That is precisely why we pray. In fact, I think it's why you and I believe in God in the first place.

- We already know that if we study hard, if we work hard and play by the rules, we stand a pretty good chance of doing well in life. We don't need God for that. Jesus teaches us that when we aren't very studious, when we are lazy, forgetful, and even down right sinful, by God's grace, good things can still happen to us. Jesus enlarges our hope.
- We already know that if we are righteous and upstanding, if we faithfully keep the Ten Commandments, God will love us. Even the Pharisees knew that. We certainly don't need God for that. Jesus teaches us that even when we are broken and wrong, when we have committed terrible sins that we are embarrassed to tell even our closest friends about, when we can't seem do the Godly thing for ten minutes in a row, God still loves and forgives us. Jesus enlarges our hope.
- You and I already know that we should love our families and go the extra mile for our friends and neighbors. That's just enlightened self-interest. We don't need God for that. Jesus teaches us that we should also love those who are different from us, the people that drive us nuts at work, and even people half way around the world that we don't know, personally. Jesus enlarges our hope.
- We already know that we should manage our money well, that we should spend wisely and be careful about going into debt. Any financial planner worth his salt can tell us that. We don't need God for that. Jesus teaches us to be generous, to hold on loosely to what is ours because it is a gift from God, to give faithfully to support the work of the Kingdom in all of its forms. Jesus enlarges our hope.
- And finally, you and I know the value of looking out into the future and following our instincts. Amazing things often happen to those willing to take a chance, but Jesus teaches us that it's not ourselves and our own dreams that we should follow but His. He is the Lord of our lives who will lead us down a path of rich excitement and blessing.

Not only does Jesus enlarge our hope, he enlarges our vision. He enlarges our hearts. He enlarges our wallets, and he enlarges our lives. That's way you and I are Christians. If we want to live narrow, petty, self-centered lives, we don't need God for that. We follow God so that we can have bigger hopes and bigger dreams, whether we are living with cancer or just facing the prospect of another ordinary week of work and family.

It's exciting to me that as a result of his encounter with the Canaanite woman, Jesus grows in his understanding of his mission. It reminds me of the kind of growing that we need to do in the church, and we can learn something about this from, of all people, the

Harley-Davidson Motorcycle Company. Harley devotees are so in love with their motorcycles that they have been known to scare off prospective customers -- people who merely like the idea of motorcycles. "People who are new to motorcycling can find us intimidating," Harley's CEO admits. "They don't know the lingo. They don't know how to get started. We need to lighten our image without losing our edge." Can the same be said of our church today? Are we, like the first disciples of Jesus, driving people away by being so enthusiastic about our own insider brand of religion? Like Harley aficionados, we tend to intimidate folks who don't know the lingo, and don't know how to get started. You think? Can Christians somehow lighten up without losing our edge?

Up in Memphis, Tennessee, at the Bumpus Harley-Davidson dealership, a new program is being launched to attract Harley wannabes. For two and a half days, a handful of newbies spend close to 16 hours on a motorcycle in a class called Rider's Edge, learning how to weave a 400-pound Hog through fluorescent green and orange cones. The teachers initiate the class into the rites of Harley: how the bikes are made, how they are sold and why people are willing to tattoo Harley's familiar black-and-orange logo on various body parts. "We wanted to take the person who felt like an outsider and turn him into an insider," says Lara Lee, the director of Rider's Edge. The trick is to do this "without making insiders feel as if we were taking away from Harley's image, which is a little bit rough and a little bit exclusive."

Jesus willingly left his home country and walked into a foreign land and learned something from a brash and concerned mother. She expended his world on the spot. You and I are followers of the Living Lord precisely because, in a world where people are dying at the end of a gun, where our neighbors are losing their homes and going hungry, where so many people do not yet know Jesus, we need God to expand our world and enlarge our

hope. If Jesus can learn something new, if Harley-Davidson can learn to practice evangelism, then maybe we can, too.

Amen