

The Good News and Us

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 15, Year A, Track 2, RCL. Isaiah 56:1, 6-8. Psalm 67. Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32. Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

It looks bad, doesn't it?

Jesus tells the Syrophenician woman, in today's Gospel reading (Matthew 15:21-28), that it isn't fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. (Matthew 15:26) She was not an Israelite, and even though he was in her territory, Jesus' first instinct was to hold his ministry apart from her ethnic group. The language he used seems harsh to us, but it was the usual terminology for in-group, out-group categorizing in those days.

From the standpoint of compassion and inclusiveness, this looks all wrong to us. We know it is wrong for us to call people dogs and deny them aid and comfort simply because they are not of the same racial or ethnic or linguistic group as us. We feel certain that Jesus should have said, "Well sure, I'll heal your daughter!"

And yes, that is the approach we should take. If someone comes to us asking for help, their race, ethnicity, and gender are not—or are not supposed to be—a barrier.

But Jesus is telling the truth when he says that he was sent "only to the lost sheep of Israel." (Matthew 15:24) Jesus is (among other things) a prophet in the Jewish tradition, and he has been sent to proclaim that God's kingdom is, even as he speaks, beginning to arrive on Earth as in heaven. The chosen people of Israel are the vector, the seed, the ground zero of this event. They have to hear its proclamation first; they get first dibs on deciding how to receive Jesus and his good news. Hence Jesus' reluctance to respond to the Syrophenician woman.

What we must bear in mind to properly understand this story is that *Jesus* in his role as prophet was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel, but as savior of the world his *message*, his good news, is universal. It's for everyone with ears to hear.

The demonstration of this in its full power began with Pentecost, after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, when the church received power to proclaim Jesus as savior to the whole world. But proleptically, that is, in anticipation of its ultimate manifestation, people had been responding to the fuller and wider implications of God's revelation to Israel for centuries. We see it in today's readings from Isaiah and from the psalms: all peoples are being called to share in God's blessing. The Syrophenician woman is in the very best of company! She is among those witnesses in Scripture who respond to the Spirit of the living God wholeheartedly.

Noticing this, Jesus' ultimate response to her is just as wholehearted. He affirms her faith and heals her daughter.

For us in our time, there are no lost sheep to whom we are not sent. *Who* needs to be healed, *what* needs to be healed, *when* the healing needs to occur, is in our hands; it is our challenge, on every level from the deeply personal to the widely social, political and economic. The Spirit of God wants our whole-hearted commitment to wholeness, in Jesus' name and with his transforming power. We need to take prayerful care in discerning how to proceed, but there is

no doubt that we are called—by thought, word and deed—to add our voices and our actions to all the reasons the world may have to see, to know, and to rejoice in the God of love and salvation.

Remembering that the world's response depends in large measure on our faithful witness, we affirm the psalmist's words: "Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you." (Psalm 67, verses 3 and 5)