

In the name of Unguarded Love: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen*

I have to confess, that the gospel for today has always thrown me. I could never figure out why Jesus sounded so harsh, so cold and calculated, so well, uh... “un-Jesus-y”!

It’s one thing to point the finger at myself, at my own inherent biases and complicities. It’s one thing to poke holes in my defenses and strategies, my own indifference and preference to turn away from noticing or acknowledging the various unsettling and unsavory types that might cross my path. But Jesus?

How could he ignore a desperate mother’s plea?
Unbelievable! It never made sense to me.

I *do* expect to hear from Him, a compassionate response.
Not this time. Not at first.
What we hear is SILENCE.

"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon!"
Her shouts fall to the ground. Seemingly unheard.

I’ve traveled a lot, found myself in many ‘foreign’ places; defined as unfamiliar, unknown, strange, exotic or even alien. I’ve moved many times as a youth, transferred many times during my 8 years in the military, and lived part-time away from home 3 years in seminary. Most of that time was without a gps to guide me, comfort me.

So I put on what I call my ‘street face’, a screen, my protective bubble that would tell others “don’t mess with me!” ’cause I knew what’s what. This shield came in handy on quite a few occasions.

One vivid moment leaps into mind after a National Geographic lecture in Washington, D.C. when a very disturbed man approached myself and the couple that had joined us for the evening. As he brandished the shiny blade in front of our faces, and in the dim streetlight, I could clearly see the massive knife scars on his face, I knew he wasn’t kidding when he said, “I’m gonna cut you up real bad!”

In that split instance, my shield came down. It seemed like our only hope was to see the humanity in this man, to validate his existence. I don’t remember the words that came out of my mouth and I often find it that way in prayer- the Spirit gives us the words we need when we need them. Put on the armor of Christ, as St. Paul says. That’s far different from the armor of ‘me’.

It seems that over the years, especially in the years spent in Boston and Cambridge while in seminary; the screen has imperfectly faded a bit, turning less opaque and more transparent through each encounter facilitated by the Spirit.

It was suggested at our lively, first outdoor breakfast Bible study this week at The Haven, that Jesus may have had his 'screen' up. From my own experience, I can't hear or even notice the voices around me – it's all 'white noise', background noise which enables me to keep pushing through the crowds without too much emotional investment.

He ignores her. She pursues him.

The disciples just want to 'send her away.'

Her shouts escalate. He answers sharply,

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house Israel." Ouch.

Does this truly sound like the Jesus we know and love??!! **No!** But perhaps, according to the teacher among us, Jesus is setting up a 'teachable' moment. What better way for our Lord to make a point about compassion for those beyond our 'usual reach', for the ones outside of our limited bubbles, than to bring his disciples to the place where there would *most assuredly* be an encounter, maybe even set up at the instigation of the Holy Spirit?

It was also noted at Bible study, that Jesus had just finished lecturing the disciples about that which defiles, Quite graphically I might add, as that which comes from within, not what is ingested. In other words, Jesus was challenging purity laws, and then commences to take them to the very place, a very large urban city on the coast, where it would be just about impossible to accommodate purity laws!

If I were among those disciples, I'd have definitely had my forcefield fully erected; allow no intrusions within my bubble! But Jesus takes this moment, planned or otherwise and makes a most unusual move.

In a divine game of chess, she throws herself at his feet, at his mercy. I imagine she gets right up in his face, blocks his passage. She demands compassion. Now the forcefields of tradition are erected full force. Jesus will not waste his compassion on her. How unlikely is this???? Undaunted she demands, "Lord, help me!" (v.25)

His words must cut her hope like dull knives. Teachable words. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." (v.26) *Check*. But her fierce razor-sharp wit cuts through to his heart. "Yes Lord! Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." (v.27) *Checkmate*. Her demands yield forth the fruit of hope. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." (v.29) And it was so. "Her daughter was healed instantly." (v.29)

This gentile, a Canaanite, despised as a pagan, and further looked down upon as a woman; refused to go unheard. No screen could withstand her. I imagine the disciples screens are left in tatters.

She is like Laverne, the woman whose life's possessions filled one old rusty shopping cart in Southwest DC and whose angry accusations got the better of me, resulting in a tenuous and temporary but fruitful friendship. She is like the Persistent Widow, who wears down the judge and wins her petition as Jesus tells in the Gospel of Luke.

But maybe our Canaanite woman inspired Jesus. Maybe she led Jesus to experience a conversion of his heart and with it, an expanded sense of mission.

Brother Almquist at the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Cambridge, MA asserts that "We need to be agents of other people's conversion... to be agents of their liberation." He believes that "some people do not change – especially to change for the better – because those who surround them [can't] imagine or allow them being any different."

Do we need more teachable moments? I suspect that the uncomfortable encounters that infiltrate our forcefields are at the divine teacher's initiative- that we may be freed from the enclosures of our own making.

We all have our own versions of purity laws. But the Spirit brings us more often than we'd probably like, face to face with our own biases and exclusions. The problem with clinging tightly to tradition is that it cannot allow God's possibilities to enter in, to reconcile, and free us. That's the problem with narrowly interpreting what defiles. That's the problem judging who is worthy, who receives mercy? who receives compassion?

Did Jesus come face to face with his own inherited bias? Or did he setup a teachable moment for his disciples, to see that God's mission isn't restricted to the elect.

The Sprit relentlessly confronts and demands that we step out of our defined comfort zones, our carefully constructed screens and bubbles and pushes us to protect the vulnerable, to fight against injustice, and against hatred that continues to warp and kill.

I pray, that God give us the courage and compassion to lower our defenses long enough to hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people, that we might fulfill our Baptismal vows in seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, striving for justice and peace among all people and respecting the dignity of every human being, and when we fall short, let us repent and return to the Lord.

Amma Susan