

## Worthy of the Miracle

This week I have been reading a number of articles about the plight of the Syrian refugees. There are more than four million people, over half of them children, fleeing their war-ravaged Syrian homeland looking for a place to settle, a people to take them in, a nation that will provide them some sanctuary. They are simply people trying to make sure their partners are safe, parents wanting to feed their children, friends looking for some community. Most basically they are seeking life. They have been turned away from many of the surrounding Arab countries and are now hoping to find asylum in Europe, but no one wants to take them. They are costly, have a ton of cultural baggage, and come from a place we in the west we regard with suspicion, even fear. Syria produces terrorists. That's the underlying fear. What if we let the wrong one in? Europe is understandably tired and a somewhat strapped for resources after the last little while of dealing with the upheaval in Greece and the constant threat in the Ukraine, and a weary and wary world would rather turn away and let them be someone else's problem.

This is just the latest example of a basic human impulse. People, in general, suffer from insecurity that causes us to create boundaries and barriers. We try to make rules that give status, value, and validity to our own group and our concerns, while denigrating or dismissing others. The poor, the infirm or the mentally ill, the minority or foreigner - take your pick - we worry about our own resources and put low priority on the needs of these groups from time to time. It is a story as old as time.

We get a two-thousand year old example of it in today's gospel reading. As the passage opens, Jesus has escaped from the normal place and pace of his ministry in Israel. He has journeyed up to the area of Tyre and Sidon, in the southern part of modern day Lebanon. He had recently been teaching and healing and sparring with the Pharisees in Jerusalem, and it appears that he is simply exhausted and wanted a retreat; the text says he didn't want anyone to know where he was. He seems to be trying to get away from his obligations for a couple of days, and have a small respite before the he had to reengage the hectic pace of life. (A desire I think many of us can relate to on a Labor Day Weekend.) Whatever the back story, Jesus was tired and clearly suffering from some compassion fatigue when the Syrophenician woman, (a person from an unsavory group of gentiles descended from the Old Testament Philistines), enters the scene with her concern; she is a mother caring for a demon-possessed daughter. What could be more urgent?

Jesus says to her one of the harshest things we have him recorded saying - "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." There isn't a nice way to read his lines. Jesus is first comparing her to a dog, and secondly dismissing her problem as unworthy of him. Jesus is saying, "look lady, I'm a Jew and I have Jewish concerns to deal with. You know, real human problems. I don't have the time or energy to deal with your people's issues. They're beneath me, like dogs. I'm all out of miracles today, and I'm tired, so go look somewhere else." Most of us would have shrunk away in humiliation. Maybe she would have too if the request had been for herself. But it was about her daughter, and every

parent knows their child is worthy of care. She responds, respectfully but boldly, "Sir, even the dogs under that table eat the children's crumbs." It breaks Jesus' weary trance and brings him back to being who he really is. She's arguing that even a human master wouldn't let his dogs lying beneath his table starve to death. Implicitly she is saying, "if you are who everyone says you are, shouldn't you be better than a human master? Can't we expect more from the one who came into the world to proclaim that God is among us?"

The Syrophenician woman reminds Jesus, reminds us all what God's mission is all about. It is about the love of God eradicating those human boundaries that we build. God's love expands beyond all barriers. God cares not one bit about the status of various human groups but absolutely about the status of being human. You do not have to wait for this grace to trickle down to your class because it is more like a rising tide lifting all. This nameless gentile woman knows who God is, she gets the master plan represented in Jesus, and that is her salvation; it is everyone's salvation, but the moment she recognizes it and speaks it aloud she can begin to feel its healing power and realize the salvation that is at hand.

Jesus' complete change of demeanor is all-telling. This is not going to take any effort from him - no need to teach her anything or even perform a further miracle because she already understands the meaning and miracle of his presence among them and so the miracle of salvation and wholeness has occurred. Jesus' response is expressing, "You are not a dog, and I am not just a man, some human master. You're a human being, and I am the Son of God. I became flesh and entered the world just to meet you in this moment of need and show you that the creator of the universe cares about your sick daughter because she is God's sick daughter too. And if you know that to be true, that means the miracle is already done. If you have faith that God came into the world to be intimately concerned with all the struggles of your human life, then you understand that in the end all will be well; God will not be defeated and so in the end all that God cares about will be made whole; and as a human being God cares about you." So Jesus just replies to her, "For saying this, you may go - the demon has left your daughter."

Yesterday, as I read the news, I came across a story about a church in Germany that has been taking in refugees from Iran and Afghanistan the last few years, helping them find resources, create community, and navigate the asylum process because once they convert to Christianity they can never go home without fear of persecution. Some of the refugees, I'm sure, come because they want to game the system to seek asylum or something; but many of them, the priest says, are becoming genuine converts. It's because in a hostile world they have found a place that cares that they are safe, that they can find the dignity of work, that their children are not only fed but have a future. They find that message being lived out, the mission of God being embodied there compelling, and they are converted. In a country where churches are routinely shuttering their doors, this church has grown in the last two years from a congregation of a hundred and fifty to more than six hundred, partially because of the swelling ranks of these refugees, but also because there are German people who have started to see what they are doing and begun to believe that the gospel they preach and enact is actually worthwhile, life-changing, world-changing. And those people want that for their own lives, they want to believe in that world rather than the one where they fight for resources and turn a blind eye to the plight of those easier marked as beneath them, and they too are joining the ranks of true believers in this compelling faith in Jesus - the God who came into the world to meet humans in their need and make them whole again.

Sometimes we need to be reminded that the great miracle has been done, God condescended to be among us in human form, and now no human being is beneath God's mercy, God's love, God's very presence. That is the very heart of the gospel. Sometimes it takes the outcast, the downtrodden, the forgotten or marginalized to remind us of the great power of the good news of Jesus Christ. But once reminded we should be the ones breaking down the structures of status and the barriers of brokenness in our world. We need to assure people of the great value of being a human beloved of God, and the ultimate hope of Jesus' healing the world. The miracle has been accomplished, God came into the world to make salvation and wholeness a reality. It is our work to help people to live into that reality and hasten the day of its complete reign. When we make that our aim, people will flock in because everyone wants to believe that the message is true. Amen.