

September 9, 2012

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 7:24-37

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare, rector

Communion

Our story of the Syrophenecian woman is troubling in that Jesus, in effect, calls a woman who is bothering him a dog because she is an outsider, not of the house of Israel. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Most commentators tell us that this turn of phrase would have been far less offensive to Semitic sensibilities than it is to ours. They would also say that the story is not really about Jesus' reaction to being bothered by someone who seems to be deflecting him from his purpose. The story of Jesus and the Syrophenecian woman is not so much about Jesus' reaction to this woman and her wit and her faith. It is about the community that God is calling into being. We have to remember what this story follows immediately from the story we heard last week about how Jesus seemed to undermine the purity laws of Israel. He was criticized for not making his disciples wash their hands. The story is more about the reality that communities necessarily develop boundaries and norms for the well being of the people *and* the reality that God tends to undermine those norms so that power to determine and control can never be absolute.

For us that means that we must be prepared to accept that our plans for how everything should go are not always going to work out, and that when they don't we should look around for the Spirit at work rather than simply being angry, frustrated and doubling down on our efforts to control what is going on around us.

In one relatively small example: Sage and I were married here with Bishop Alexander officiating on the Monday morning after Pentecost in 2006. We had tried to work out how to get married in a way that allowed us to celebrate with everyone important to us at one time and in one place without success. So we decided that we would get married with only our children present. Then we would go to England and give a party there, returning to give another here in Atlanta and finally a celebratory reception here at All Saints'. It was a fun time. But the business of getting married with only our children present did not work out quite as planned. First it became apparent to me that the wonderful staff we enjoy here were planning to get together to watch things on the security monitor. You might know that we leave the church open during the week, unusual in this day and age, but we do have a camera in the back and we have a monitor near our reception desk in Egleston. The idea of everyone sitting around there seemed silly so we said of course they could come into the service if they wanted to. Sage was running the Arthritis Foundation for Georgia in those days and said that the staff there was interested as well, so we talked, and she went on and invited them. Later, looking at the photographs, Sage's mother asked who these people were in the pictures as she thought no one was invited to the wedding. There was no good answer, and she would not have been persuaded by my saying "Think of the Syrophenecian woman. God has a

way of opening up and expanding occasions of grace, especially in and around the church.”

I confess that this particular instance did not cause me to re-evaluate the way I was seeing the world, but real communion—the kind that flows from not only eating a symbolic meal together, but rather comes from eating together and sharing stories—real communion demands some shift in our perspective on the world. Maria Doria Russell is an anthropologist who has written some novels. The first one is called *The Sparrow* (1996). She set it in space as she could think of nowhere on earth that allowed her to explore what a genuinely first encounter is like, what assumptions we bring to a new relationship and so on. It becomes clear in the novel that the friendly race that our heroes encounter first is actually being bred and harvested for food by another species. As we read, we start to question our own assumptions and discover our blind spots in relation to others. Rather than being a story about space, it is a story about relationships—about communion.

We know that communities must set norms and boundary markers in order to exist. At the same time those norms and boundary markers must be open to change or challenge. There is a movement underway, for example, that argues that people who are homeless are essentially victims of an unjust economic system; that they can form community and their existence should challenge the basis of our economic system.¹ Our city council is engaged in just such a debate as they question the legality of panhandling, trying to walk the line between preventing the harassment of people seeking to go about their business by people begging for money and the civil rights of those doing the asking. In many communities there are all kinds of ways of maintaining social norms short of criminalizing whatever is deemed poor behavior. At the same time just because some norms get questioned or challenged does not mean that the questioner immediately gets to call all the shots. There is a complicated dance that has to occur in social change that focuses on what constitutes human thriving. Think about some of the societal changes that have taken place in your own lifetime. Is it alright for a community to expect that those who find themselves living on the streets access programs designed to help them participate in a society in which most people live indoors? Or should we say that because some kind of community forms among people who believe themselves victimized by an unjust economic system that they should not be asked, required or coerced into trying to thrive with the mainstream? I don't have answers, but I'm grateful to Councilman Michael Julian Bond and others for engaging the questions for the benefit of everybody.

Communion is marked by ever expanding grace and by specific relationship being worked out in specific times and places. Somewhere in all of the writing about the astronaut Neil Armstrong in recent weeks I have been reminded of the story of Buzz Aldrin, also part of that Apollo 11 crew that landed and walked on the moon for the first time. He was a Presbyterian elder who used his pastor's home communion kit to take communion on the moon. He asked everyone to contemplate what had happened and give thanks in her or his own way. There is something both touching and true for me in this story of marking great accomplishment and the magnificence of the whole of

¹ Laura Stivers, *Disrupting Homelessness: Alternative Christian Approaches* (Prisms, 2011)

creation with the specific gifts of bread and wine; of Buzz Aldrin on the moon doing what we do here week in and week out—enjoying a kind of shorthand for both the limited specific realities of human community that we inhabit in the midst of awareness of the expansiveness of the universe and the expansiveness of God’s grace always renewing and enlarging those communities through the gifts of sacrificial love. So it is with our story from Mark; the people of God expanded to include the Syrophenecian woman in the abundance of God’s grace.

In a time of silence for prayer, may we respond with gratitude for the reality that even we have been included in this abundance of grace.