



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday March 16th 2014 - Lent II

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

The passage selected for the sermon this morning is taken from the Gospel:

“His disciples came and besought Him, saying, Send her away, for she crieth after us. But He answered and said, ‘I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of Israel.’ Then came she and worshipped Him, saying, ‘Lord help me.’”

The Gospel this morning relates a three way encounter between Our Lord, his disciples, and this frantic woman. Though the story line is simple, the account is overflowing with powerful insights and lessons for us in our Lenten preparation and in our preparation for Holy Communion this morning.

The first image is evoked as Jesus makes the comment about coming only for the lost sheep of Israel. For years I read this account assuming that Jesus is making a really cruel rebuke to this poor frantic woman, and to be honest, I could never reconcile that harshness with Jesus Christ, the healer, the Good Shepherd seeking the sheep that are not of His fold. It seemed that Jesus was calling this woman a dog,

simply because she was born to a different ethnic background, a different culture, maybe a shade different color, than the children of Israel. This was an image that just always seemed wrong to me.

Of course the image was wrong, and I was wrong. Just as anyone who reads the Gospels, or Scripture in general, and finds a justification for exclusion, for hatred, for promotion of a self selected Chosen few, or finds a rationalization for elevating ourselves above the other lost sheep based on our own merit, is just wrong.

When Jesus says, “I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of Israel,” He isn’t speaking to the woman. He is responding to the disciples who are begging for Jesus to send her away. He is rebuking the disciples because they only saw a poor woman, who was different from them, who didn’t contribute to their earthly aspirations to ride the Messiah’s coattails to an earthly kingdom. He rebukes them because they fail to recognize a lost child of the Covenant Chosen, a sheep belonging to the Good Shepherd.

The disciples, proud that they are the genetic children of Israel, forget that the blessing

of Abraham included the promise that Abraham's seed that would be a blessing to all the families of the earth. In St. John's Gospel, Jesus reminds us that He has "many sheep that are not of this fold, them also I must bring, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one fold, and one Shepherd." (St. John 10:16)

This portion of today's Gospel is a warning to the disciples that they must learn to see the world with the eyes of the Good Shepherd. Those people who impose on us when we are tired, those people who are not like us, those people who don't have any way to pay us back, or help our personal cause, or improve our social status, those are the lost sheep to whom Jesus leads us. If we are to follow Him, we must go to them.

Having dealt with the disciples, Jesus continues the lesson and addresses the woman. "It is not meet to give the children's bread to the dogs." Is Jesus now condemning this woman as a dog because she was born a Canaanite rather than a Jew? No. Jesus is merely pronouncing the state of her spiritual condition. This woman is not yet one of the sheep. She is not yet one of the children. The pronouncement isn't prejudice, but fact.

And the woman is not offended. Her concern for her daughter has brought her to such desperation that she just absorbs the pronouncement. She doesn't bristle in pride, and storm away. She knows that is nothing she can do on her own to stop being a Canaanite, she cannot earn the children's bread by any act or merit under her own power. Her desperation has stripped her of her pride, so she accepts the truth about her condition, and in humility, and in love for her daughter, she begs just for mercy, to receive the children's crumbs. Her condition is the condition we all share as sinners. We are dogs who are born of sin and who live in sin. We

are a different culture, a different race, under a just sentence of death that separates us from the race of the children of God who have everlasting life.

The Canaanite woman, acknowledged her condition, and her helplessness to change it. She recognized that Jesus was Lord, worshipped Him, and put her faith in His mercy. Jesus answers, "O woman, great is thy faith, be it done unto thee even as thou wilt." By faith and grace, she is made a child of God, and fittingly receives the children's bread, bread meant for her.

In St. John's gospel, we are told just that, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me, and I give unto them eternal life, and neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." Jesus is the Bread of Life and if we eat of Him, we shall have eternal life, and that we will dwell in Him and He in us. The Bread of Heaven is reserved for us, even though we must profess, like the woman, that we are unworthy to eat even the crumbs. But our faith makes us Children of God, guests at the Table on which the Bread of Life is offered. And like the Canaanite woman, if our faith is great, our souls will be healed.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen