

**Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 8/14/05**  
**St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York**  
**Text: Matthew 15:21-28**

A few weeks ago, on a Tuesday evening, I was doing some work here in the parish hall in preparation for an adult education forum that was to start at 8 p.m. I had met with Kim, our senior warden, and Jenn, our parish administrator, from 3 to 5 in the office, as is our weekly routine. And then, rather than going home between the time our meeting ended and when the class would begin, I decided to stay, to continue preparing for the evening's discussion.

I turned on the air conditioner, set up a table and chairs, and began reviewing my notes. Before long, I heard some voices that I thought might be kids shouting to each other as they were playing or riding bikes outside. I tried to focus on my work, but I was distracted as the noise continued. Those weren't the voices of kids, I realized. It sounded like some fairly raucous folks were partying on the lawn. I peeked out of one of the windows and saw three somewhat disheveled people – a man standing near an old jeep at the curb, a woman on the porch of the parish house next door, and another woman on the lawn.

Jenn had mentioned during our meeting that a woman who has asked for help in the past had called again that day, needing money and some clothing for herself and her sister. We try to give grocery cards for food when we can, and clothing from the Thrift Shop when it's available, to people in need. Most of those who ask for our help do it infrequently and receive it gratefully. The woman who had called that day, though, seemed to be in need quite often, presented her case to us somewhat aggressively, and wasn't particularly forthcoming in her thanks. From her behavior, it's clear that she's struggling with both mental health and social issues.

The woman hadn't been able to get to the parish office before the end of the business day to pick up the grocery card, so Jenn had left it in an envelope in the mailbox. I assumed, then, that the two women outside were the woman and her sister. I had no idea who the older man was with them – maybe he had driven them here. Whatever the situation, they now had the promised grocery card, and I could get back to my work.

Or not. Suddenly, someone started pounding on the door to the kitchen, and shouting something that I couldn't make out. I froze, startled and nervous. The pounding and shouting seemed to go on and on, then stopped as suddenly as it had started. Then, there was pounding and shouting at the wooden door to the parish hall. These folks just weren't going to give up. They must have known that someone was around, because my car was in the driveway. I was locked in and had a phone available, so I knew that I wasn't in any danger. But their pushy persistence really shook me up, and when they finally left a little later, I felt both relieved and completely unsettled. Nagging questions interfered with my class preparation: What was I afraid of? Why hadn't I opened the door and engaged them in conversation when it was clear that they knew someone was around? Would I have reacted differently if there had been only one of them, rather than

three; or if they hadn't been so loud; or if they hadn't looked so down and out? Would I have been more willing to talk with them if I hadn't been worried about being fully prepared for the class? Would the situation have felt different if they hadn't been strangers to me?

Lots of other questions arise for us as we consider this morning's very difficult text from the Gospel of Matthew. Here are just a few of those questions: Did this story happen just as it's recorded here, or did the experiential lens, through which the words of all writers emerge, influence Matthew's content or tone? Would Jesus have been more attentive to the Canaanite woman if she'd approached him and the disciples with better manners – humbly and quietly, rather than boldly shouting? Why did Jesus practically make the woman beg for help before he responded? Was he really as harsh with her as the text implies? Did Jesus blatantly insult her by referring to her and her people as “dogs”? Why didn't she just insult him back and walk away, rather than seemingly accept his racial slur? Is this story more about a foreshadowing of the expansion of the Gospel from the Jews to the Gentiles than about Jesus interacting with a particular woman? Is there something that the earliest hearers and readers would have understood from this encounter that we, so far removed, are simply missing? And, given the less than flattering portrayal of Jesus' behavior here, why would the Gospel writer have chosen to include this story?

Unfortunately, even biblical scholars don't know the answers to these questions. There are as many opinions as there are experts. Maybe Jesus was so very focused on the calling of God that he understood as uniquely his – reaching out to the people of Israel – that he was trying to set clear and healthy boundaries by not becoming distracted by the needs of this Gentile woman. Maybe the dogs that Jesus referred to weren't the annoying strays roaming the streets of the cities, but were, instead, beloved pets expecting to be fed morsels from the family meal. Maybe the Canaanite woman didn't hear an insult to her and her people in the words of Jesus – maybe what he meant and what she understood was simply this: “The children of Israel are to be fed first, then the Gentiles.” Maybe Jesus was testing the woman. Maybe he was testing the disciples, expecting them to intervene and take up the Canaanite woman's cause. We just don't know.

I'm disturbed by the Jesus I meet in this story. It doesn't make sense to me that the same Jesus who told his followers to love their enemies would ignore and then apparently insult a Gentile woman who called him “Lord,” asked him for mercy, and begged him for help on behalf of her suffering child. It doesn't make sense to me that the same Jesus who ate with sinners, welcomed the marginalized, and treated women with more respect than was the custom in that patriarchal culture would ever respond to an outsider who sought him out as he does in this story. If Jesus is, as our tradition claims, the perfect revelation of God, then what is Jesus' strange behavior here all about?

We really don't know. But all week, as I've wrestled with the meaning of this passage about a demanding outsider who was in real need, I've been thinking about those three noisy and persistent people pounding on the parish hall door. It actually eases my guilt just a bit that even Jesus may have struggled with being available to certain people at an

inconvenient time. It gives me comfort, after all, to be reminded that Jesus was so fully human that the demands of ordinary life that can cause me to veer off track were things that he dealt with as well.

And, more important, I'm encouraged that even with a couple of false starts, Jesus did listen to this shouting, foreign woman, look into her eyes, and allow her life to touch his. In that encounter, she changed him. If I'm given a second chance to listen to one, or two, or three of those disheveled, needy strangers who were pounding on our doors, I bet that I'll be changed too, with God's help.

Who are those "others" whom we tend to disregard? Who are the ones most easy for us to ignore? What is it about them that scares us? May each of us draw from the power of God within us and the example of Jesus before us to move beyond the boundaries of what's known and comfortable, and to risk being changed by the "other." Amen.