

Proper 15, Year A
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St. Paul's, Newburyport, MA

I know that I have said this to many of you individually over the past year, but now I will say it in a sermon. My heart skipped a beat when I first read your parish profile online two years ago. My heart skipped a beat because I found such congruence between what you said you felt called to in ministry in Jesus name, and my own sense of calling. And in the process of discerning that mutual calling and my first year as your rector, I have seen that the profile was true and accurate. I have seen the hospitality of Christ with arms wide open to the world embodied through this community's life together. And Marco, Marcella, Nicolas and I have experienced that hospitality personally in so many ways. So it's with a grateful heart that I stand here among you as we begin year 2 of our ministry together in Christ's name.

But what would happen if I began showing up to services on Sunday wearing this... (puts on a Yankee baseball cap). Can it be? Is she really a Yankee fan? Say it is not so! Well, Marco, claims it is a genetic defect in the Hubbard family- of course Marco is a Red Sox

fan from way back, so he would say that. Now, some of you who are not at all interested in baseball might not care if I made this part of my liturgical garb on Sundays. But others of you, having to see the Yankees logo bobbing up and down in the pulpit and at the altar every week might begin to take offense. Not to worry – I won't be wearing it on Sundays. This was just a good-natured way to get us in touch with what might be going on in this morning's Gospel.

It seems to be a hardwired human trait to notice difference and to have some sort of aversion to that which is different. Perhaps this is a left over from the days when noticing difference and keeping with "one's own kind" (however one defines that) was a matter of survival. Perhaps one could say then that it is part of human nature. And this morning we may notice it in our brother, Jesus. His human nature is on display in his interaction with the Canaanite woman who comes to him seeking healing for her daughter.

The Canaanites were residents of the part of Palestine west of the Jordan River and part of what is present day Syria. The Canaanite priests and their God Baal played a significant role as the

nemesis of the Prophets Elijah and Elisha in the first and second books of Kings in the Hebrew Scriptures. So the presence of this woman of Canaan in this morning's Gospel *"recalls the original struggle between the Hebrews and the indigenous population of the land."*

The old rivalries that swirled around in the air when the prophets of Baal challenged the prophets of Yahweh are reignited. But the woman of Canaan is determined. She cuts through the fog of old conflicts and addresses Jesus as *"Son of David"* – a royal title. She yells to him from a distance, begging him to heal her little daughter. Jesus ignores the woman, but the disciples want him to do more – to rebuke her and send her away. His response is to speak out loud about his understanding of the scope of his mission. He says, *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."* That is the boundary, the limit of his ministry – to the house of Israel and not further! But the woman is bold and presses the limit. She has the audacity to approach him more closely and kneel in front of him and address him as *"Lord"*. With her in his path, he must respond. He tells her, *"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."*

Much has been made of this response by Biblical commentators through the years. Some say he was testing the disciples, trying to get them to see their own prejudice – one he did not share. Some say he was testing her faith, and used the insult as a way to see how she would respond. I myself think that what we are seeing here is his human nature. Could this be his growing edge? If he is fully human as we are, did he not have to struggle with the hardwired response toward difference that we all struggle with in one way or another?

The woman's response to Jesus reveals that she is convinced that what has divided her people from his over the centuries is not the last word. Her faith is in the presence of God in Jesus and in the compassion of God for all people. She does not take offense at being called a dog, but instead argues that both gentiles (dogs) and Jews (children) are under the same authority. The authority that Jesus represents – the authority of the God who is creator, redeemer and provider of bread for all people. I wonder if Jesus's heart skipped a beat at that moment as he looked deep within her and recognized the congruence that existed between them and their

sense of God's desire for reconciliation in the world. I believe the man who then spoke was a man who, through this interaction, has grown past something in himself. Jesus says to her, "*Woman great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.*" And, we are told, "*Her daughter was healed instantly.*"

The good news here is that if we are tripped up by our own prejudices, we are in good company. And the good news is that people of great faith are called to lovingly challenge prejudice in themselves and in each other. The good news is that amazing healing can come when we do. I was talking to someone this week who had just taken this sort of brave action in her own personal life – bridging a divide with someone she often struggled with. She told me it was hard work. Her mantra to herself during that work was "*the world is depending on me to do this.*" And indeed it is - depending on all of us to do this work. We should never underestimate the ripple effect of our ability to make peace across divides of difference.

There is just one last thing I want to say – Go Red Sox!

In Christ's name. Amen+

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