

**SERMON FOR ORDINARY SUNDAY 20A
MATTHEW 15:21-28 ALL SAINTS
BIRKENHEAD**

Sometimes in life we meet people who are so different to ourselves. The way they dress, the way they speak and their views on the world. Often this difference can cause conflict, and in some cases you may never get along with that certain person at all. Conflict in the church is one of the most difficult. It is not like a business environment where we can put people on notice or fire them. We are called to a different way of dealing with conflict and criticism. But sometimes it's even more difficult because we are talking about deeply held beliefs which stir all sorts of emotions and criticisms.

2

When some conflict or criticism has been leveled at you and you have not been able or willing or allowed to resolve the difference between you and the other person you can feel hopeless. I know I'm left feeling less than

me, out of sorts with the other person, unresolved, as if something still hangs in the air between us that I can't grasp and deal with. That's what criticism often does if we have no way of dealing with it. If we are unable, for whatever reason, to stay in relationship with the other, each maintaining their own dignity, integrity, power, self worth, then we both loose out. Something comes between us that lessens the respect we have for each other. So often we take criticism personally when it may not be intended that way. So often criticism is given in a way which is personal. Somehow we need to develop ways to hear criticism. We need to develop ways to give criticism in a manner that will not produce an adverse reaction in the other.

3

Jesus dealings with the Canaanite woman, and the way this woman deals with Jesus have a lot to teach me about this process of criticism.

The criticism of Jesus to the woman is of a sort we don't expect. She comes seeking healing for her daughter and is told "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Jesus seems to be caught with his compassion down. A worried parent is told she is a dog. Sorry all you dog lovers, but it was a term of abuse in Jesus day. There is no escaping that scriptural use of the word dog. It occurs in other places too and is used in this same derogatory fashion. Doesn't Jesus have the right to use it? The woman is a Canaanite after all. Jews looked down on Canaanites and often referred to them in this way. They usually didn't talk to each other. And even for a man to be talking to a woman in public is unusual. No wonder the disciples urged Jesus to send her away. To have a Canaanite woman shouting after you was so embarrassing. Jesus doesn't even want to talk to her because he says to the disciples "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." She is not my concern. But the woman persists. "Lord, help me." This is the second time of asking. Persistent isn't she?

Jesus responds with his now famous line "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." What I have come to give is only for Jews, not Canaanite dogs. She cleverly retorts "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Somehow this woman is not cowed by Jesus calling her a dog. She respects who Jesus is, and calls him Lord, Son of David. She respects her own place in relation to him. She knows she is a Canaanite dog and doesn't deny it. She uses what she is to get what she wants for her daughter. All the way through this exchange the woman stays in relationship with Jesus. She doesn't pretend, she doesn't try to be like Jesus, she doesn't play games, she tells it like it is. In doing so she challenges everything that is against her, and wins.

5

This woman seems much more clever than I am. I usually think of the witty response long after the conversation is over. But it's not really about being clever or witty. It's about us learning to maintain our own dignity and self worth in the face of criticism. I think it has more to do with an inner disposition which allows us to listen more carefully to what others are saying. Listening to the criticism is important because it is often a place to learn. We cannot control what others say, but we can control our response. If we have it in mind to stay in relationship with the other, if we have developed this inner disposition, then it is surprising what our response can become. Then we will seek to understand the criticism, we will not take it personally, we will not play the game the other may seem to be playing. We will seek to discover how we might improve what we are doing. We will seek to learn something new from another fellow traveler, and most importantly we will stay in relationship. Whether we end up agreeing or

not is of little consequence. Maintaining the relationship is what is of most importance.

6

Jesus was confronted by this woman and was required to stay in relationship with her. She didn't let him off the hook with his "lost sheep of the house of Israel". Dogs are important too. So Jesus stayed in relationship with this woman and broke with all his strict rabbinical training. He crossed over the ethnic, gender, religious, and political boundaries that separated him from the Canaanite woman. Of course it is important to realize that breaking the rules can lead to crucifixion. We need to be aware of the pain and suffering that may ensue from such a decision. We may well be challenged to challenge the authorities. Crucifixion may be the result. Yet even here we know there is hope. We know the seeds of new life are present even in crucifixion. And in essence that is what we are called to do, to

break boundaries, to try new or even old things. These may lead us to upsetting some people and being criticized, but this is a part of the process that leads to new life. We are a church faced with enormous problems, dwindling and aging congregations, churches that may be empty in 10-15 years. So we need to take risks like the women in our story today if we are to find a future.

For she took risks too in crossing the boundaries that divided her from Jesus. She respected him and maintained her own position. Her hope was for the one who usually gets forgotten in this story. Her daughter was healed instantly. Her hope for new life was fulfilled.

7

This gospel invites us to develop the hope that drove the woman to break down the walls that divide. This hope comes through wanting to

stay in relationship with others no matter what they throw at us. We will not always succeed, but we will always be driven on to seek that which we know Jesus asks of us. So we can thank God in this Eucharist that out of the pain and struggle of our human relationships there is always the possibility of the new life and the healing we so earnestly desire. The Gospel truth is that we may face the death of all that we once knew. But through that death there is hope, there is new life.