

Homily
August 16-17, 2008

I am the voice of the Canaanite woman.

I have no name, no history; not much is written about me. But I have a voice. My voice shaped the course of salvation history.

My voice was heard by Mark and Matthew, who dared write down my words, dared to record how I challenged their holy man, Jesus of Nazareth, and influenced the course of his mission.

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I had to raise my voice to be heard that day. I had to shout at him, so great was the distance between us. Me, a Gentile woman, and him, Jesus of Nazareth, a Galilean Jew.

My voice carried across the great divide between us: "Have mercy on me, Lord. My daughter is tormented by a demon."

Yes, I called him "Lord, Son of David," for I knew who he was. And I knew what he could do, if he only would.

At first, he pretended not to hear me. And I know why. A woman? Speaking to a man in public?

Not done. Not a Gentile woman, speaking to a Jewish man,

Ah, the sheer *chutzpah* I felt that day!

I a Gentile; he a Jew. You see, his people looked down on my people. Called us dogs. This one was no different. It did not bother me. He was human after all. Dogs! No more than a figure of speech.

But my voice would not be silenced. Nothing would silence my voice-----

not gender,

not ethnic difference,

not socioeconomics,

not politics,

not culture.

I would not be silent.

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Those around him grew tired of my voice. They wanted to exclude me. He spoke of being sent "only to the lost sheep of Israel."

Even then I persisted.

You may ask what kept my voice from faltering? Why did I persist?

One word: *mercy*.

I knew him as a man of great mercy.

When he made that remark about not taking the food of children and throwing it to the dogs, I saw my chance. I knew about dogs. I knew that Jews regarded dogs that roamed the streets, scavenging for scraps, as unclean.

But I knew another kind of dog. I knew about the little dogs that sat beneath my table, household pets, who ate the small scraps that fell to them when my children ate. I knew mercy from my daily household experience.

And so when he said "dogs," I thought, "little puppies," those humble pets who receive mercy at my table.

When I said, "Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters," I knew my voice had prevailed.

His defenses crumbled. It was as though he had seen something he had not seen before. He seemed to suddenly be aware that he mercy did not have to be confined by gender, or ethnicity, or socio-economic boundaries. My humble experience of household mercy had touched his heart. He could not resist me.

He used a word to describe my faith that does not appear anywhere else in your gospel. He said, "O woman, great is your faith!"

***Great*. That is the word he used to describe my faith.**

But as he said those words, I whispered to myself, “And great is your mercy, Lord, for now it extends to all people, not just to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

I know he was thinking that, because when he left there he went to the Sea of Galilee, which was where many Gentiles lived. There he healed many people and as Matthew says, “they praised the God of Israel.”

Those were my people, the Gentiles, who praised the God of Israel. And they received mercy, because my voice had changed Jesus of Nazareth. My voice challenged him, stretched him, deepened him, broadened his mission to Gentiles, not just Jews.

I am the voice of the Canaanite woman. Any my voice cannot be silenced.

My voice can still be heard across the divide that separates the powerless, the weak, all those excluded from the mercy of Christ.

When a Palestinian mother weeps for her children, dying because of politics, my voice is raised in a plea for mercy.

When a Mexican-American woman weeps because her children know boredom, frustration, and eventually the violence of gangs, my voice pleads for mercy.

**When a welfare mother is homeless,
because she cannot pay her rent,
because her welfare check was spent to fix her car,
because she must work to keep her welfare check,
and she needs her car to get to work,
my voice begs for mercy.**

Wherever there are persons excluded from mercy, my voice will be heard.

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