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Psalm 133

Matthew 15:21-28

## HOW VERY GOOD AND PLEASANT

The faith community was on retreat, which was great because they needed some rest. After an intense time of ministry, devoted to teaching and feeding people, they needed a place to go where they wouldn't be mobbed by those who had heard the compelling stories about their leader. They wanted to go to a place where they wouldn't be recognized, where they could quietly reflect on what might be next steps for their ministry. Quite likely, they were seeking a bit of respite, hoping for re-creation and renewal, a bit of a summer break if you will. But a request for ministry still found them even there, and it was an urgent, loud, and surprising request.

Jesus and his disciples had ministered primarily in the Galilee region and they were becoming quite well-known there, so they went where they thought no one would have heard about them. This group of Jewish folk heads into Phoenicia, a Canaanite or Gentile region northwest of Galilee. At that time, Jews and Gentiles typically didn't have anything to do with one another. It was a long and complicated history, but these people of different religious practices and ethnic heritages kept their distance from each other. But somehow, the identity of the faith community on retreat leaked out, at least to one unnamed Gentile woman. About the only thing that unified Jews and Gentiles at that time was the shared understanding that a woman would not approach a group of men and a Gentile would not initiate contact with those who were Jewish. But this woman does not follow those norms. She approaches the group and she does so loudly. She begins and continues shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." That demon terminology is used in various gospel accounts to describe a number of afflictions. We don't know how this girl who wasn't present was tormented, but a power beyond her control had a destructive grip on her life. Her mother

was motivated by the girl's urgent need and she was not going to miss out on an opportunity to move toward something that might be a reason for hope.

What would be the response to all the yelling? There were a lot of voices being raised in Charlottesville last weekend, some filled with hate and an understanding that one race of people is superior and everyone else should stay in their place of inferiority. It wasn't like it had been in the Charleston, South Carolina shooting two years earlier where a lone white gunman went to a bible study in a black church and shot and killed nine African Americans, including the church's pastor. He left only one woman alive, the shooter said, so she could tell the world what had happened there, in hopes of spreading fear.<sup>1</sup> This time, the KKK and neo-Nazis and white nationalists were in large numbers and many of them were armed to the teeth. Those who follow these hate groups have warned about their rise in numbers and aggression. There have been a lot of voices raised. What is an appropriate response for our faith community?

It took a bit for the faith community in our story in Matthew to figure out the right response. Did you notice the varied responses to the woman's loud and urgent expressions in the story? In essence, she receives three responses, one right after another. Jesus' initial response to the woman's request is one of silence. Then the disciples declare that they do not want to have anything to do with her. They urge Jesus, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." Although her child's need is urgent, they find her loud entreaties to be obnoxious and rude as she fails to do things decently and in order. The third response to the woman comes as Jesus says that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Is Jesus checking his mission statement? Perhaps. That is a wise thing for a faith community to do whenever they see a particular need, as long as they are open for God to address them anew.

Had she been advocating only for herself, the woman may well have given up in light of the first three responses. But since she is there on behalf of her child, this critical character in the story who is not there, the woman continues, this time kneeling and pleading. Jesus quotes what may have been a saying of that time indicating that he is not responsible for feeding those not at his table.

The woman continues her relentless pursuit, replying that there is enough of what God had provided that the excess would not be missed. In response, Jesus finally expresses his assessment of the woman. Amazed at her commitment and dogged persistence, he gives her one of the highest affirmations recorded in any of the gospel accounts: “Woman, great is your faith!” Great is your faith! Then he heals the child who isn’t there. What are the signs of this faith that Jesus labels as great? It must be her relentless determination, her courage, in allowing no barrier to block her from speaking for her child who could not speak for herself.

The media focused quite a bit on the back and forth of protesters and counter-protesters last weekend, and many wondered whether violence would break out anew in other gatherings this weekend. I’m relieved that for the most part it did not. But in all of that reporting, among those most impacted were a group who weren’t there, who weren’t mentioned. We didn’t hear about the children who were being demonized by those who were spewing their hatred. Think of the children of color and the Jewish children who were filled with fear because of the violent threats delivered last weekend. Frankly, there have been many children demonized in recent months, and not just by those who call themselves white supremacists – Muslim children or children whose immigration status made them targets of hatred. There were children denigrated because they were differently abled; there were youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender who have been objects of hatred; there were children who were not viewed as valuable enough to be given water without lead in it. All of these children or youth are created in God’s image, and when they are being demonized by such hatred, we who are followers of Jesus must not get stuck in one of the earlier responses on the faith community we heard about in Matthew’s story. The church cannot simply remain silent in the face of such things. Let’s not send away those with urgent need just because we may not like the style of their approach. Let’s not define our mission statement so narrowly that it cannot convey the breadth of the love of God for all people, including those who are spewing hatred.

In Jesus' story, this is the point where his ministry expands so that none of God's beloved children would be excluded. The ministry had started in Galilee, but perhaps it is through the expression of this woman's great faith, that Jesus sees more clearly that it was time in keeping with God's will to reach out to all people. The breadth of God's mercy required nothing less. The responsibilities of the church got redefined in the process. Matthew's Gospel concludes with Jesus' great commission in which he calls upon the church to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey all he had commanded them. The liberating and healing and loving power of the gospel is for everyone. Let's hope that someday Jesus might look upon our persistence, our diligence, our advocacy for the vulnerable ones around us and also label our faith as great.

When people were streaming toward Jerusalem to gather for Passover observances, they would often chant the 133<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, which begins, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" Hatred can unify one small group against another. But the power of the love of God for each and every child of God is that which can ultimately enable us to see how very good and pleasant it is when all of God's family lives together in unity. For that to happen, we as people of faith, motivated by God's love for all of God's children, will need to widen the circle of which we have been a part. And we will see how very good and pleasant true unity can be.

<sup>1</sup> From an account in a Southern Poverty Law Center resource - <https://www.splcenter.org/20170814/ten-ways-fight-hate-community-response-guide>