

16 August 2020

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 15:21-28

For a change, the hero of the Gospel reading is not Jesus. In fact, he doesn't come across all that well at all! (more on that later). The woman, a mother, inspires us. She shows us that driven by love, we can do great things. I think if she were just asking for herself, she might have slinked off by herself after being rebuffed by the apostles and Jesus, but she was there for her daughter. She persisted, she didn't get angry but used her cleverness to actually reveal something important to Jesus. I think of all the parents I see here in the parish doing difficult and good things for their children. Financial sacrifices, driving them all over the place, finding best medical care and counseling when it's needed. **I bet when we present our scrapbook of good deeds we're proud of to God one day, it'll be those things we did for the sake of loving another that will hold pride of place.**

She was driven by love. Jesus not so much, at least initially in the story.

I really enjoy being right about stuff, probably too much so. I remember backpacking with Fr. Brice and some others about this time of year in near the Grand Tetons in Wyoming. We saw these three majestic mountain in front of our campsite and I said "Those are the Tetons." Fr. Brice took out his compass and map and declared that they were not the Tetons. Then I pulled out my water bottle that I'd just bought from a store called "Teton Mountaineering" that had the three peaks as its logo printed on the bottle. He had his map and compass but I had my water bottle. He remained skeptical but our companions were convinced that I was right, and I was, as it turned out, by the way. I liked that.

On another backpacking trip with just one other person, my friend Mark, we had a conflict. I think it was actually my very first backpacking trip in the mountains, so I had done my research to take only items that didn't weigh very much. **Dry pancake mix** would be good because we could get the water from a stream and needed only a little oil that we could take in an almost weightless plastic bottle. To sweeten the pancakes, I packed brown sugar—that was a trick my mom used to do when we ran out of syrup at home, **adding brown sugar to water** and boiling it up. So, that seemed like a good lightweight solution. We stopped at the Greeley, Colorado IGA for a few last minute supplies when I noticed that Mark had put into our shopping basket a bottle of real **maple syrup**. I said, "We can't take that—too heavy, the glass could break, and it's sticky and could attract animals at night. You can't take that," I said confidently like a man who know what he was talking about. "Of course I can take it," he said, with equal confidence.

You know how they say "Don't sweat the small stuff"? Well, I sweated the small stuff that day. My self-image as someone who knew what he was doing must have taken control because I dug in my heels on this maple syrup issue. So did he. He was convinced that I was being really foolish, and I was frustrated that he was inviting pulled muscles and bears into our week in the wilderness. We drove the last hour to the trailhead without talking. Finally, knowing that our friendship and the enjoyment of the next seven days was at stake, I said something like, "I really think I'm right, and I really don't want to take that syrup into the backcountry, but our friendship is more important to me than the syrup, so I guess you can take it. So he took it.

Now, I'd like to think that we woke up one morning, mixed the dry batter mix with the mountain stream water, fried up some pancakes and delighted in real maple syrup while looking at some 14,000' peaks

over the valley. But I'm pretty sure that **while he did that, I boiled up some brown sugar water for myself, unable to let go of the righteousness of my cause.**

Thanks heavens Jesus was not like me.

Jesus' "brown sugar" was his belief that his mission was to Jews only, as he said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." He's saying, "I have come only for fellow Jews, not for Gentiles." And to the woman he even goes so far as to use a very insulting phrase that "food that is meant for the children shouldn't be given to the dogs." "Dog" was an insulting term that Jews used for Gentiles—honestly, it was a racist slur, which is hard to say of our Lord. It wasn't a sin because that's what he thought was the right thing to say. However, it was wrong. And it took the cleverness, the persistence and the love of the Canaanite woman to reveal to him that he was wrong. And the Glory of the Lord in this story is that he did not get defensive. He held his ego lightly apparently, because when he found out he was wrong, he changed his tune and let his healing love pour out to the daughter of this Gentile woman.

Some people who are scandalized at the thought that Jesus could be wrong interpret this story as Jesus sort of "playing with the woman," pretending to be a stingy and prejudiced in order to test her faith and draw out more faith from her. That could be, I suppose. But I like to take these stories at face value and honestly, the story has much more saving power for me, as one who struggles with the need to be right all the time, when it is an example of Jesus actually being wrong and then responding with such graciousness, humility, and of generosity when he realizes that he has messed up.

So, again, Jesus shows us the way. Like Jesus I would like to value being loving much more than being right. That way, when I am wrong, it's not that big a deal, but there's a whole lot more at stake when I cease to be loving. In our subsequent wilderness trips, we took maple syrup and left the brown sugar behind. But he has to carry the syrup.