

**St. Mark's Episcopal Church
San Antonio, Texas**

**The Rev. Jane Lancaster Patterson
August 17, 2008**

Proper 15-A

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Psalm 67; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-18

Jesus said, "Woman, Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

Earlier this summer, my brother, Jim, and I each made a visit to my parents' house in Florida, though we weren't able to go at the same time. Jim took his daughter, Sarah, and her boyfriend for the serious meet-your-girlfriend's-grandparents visit, while I went several weeks later by myself. But I might as well have been traveling to a parallel universe, our trips were so different. With young people in tow, my brother had a really delightful time. They went to the beach, they ate out, they took long walks. They listened to stories my parents told of their early married life, and laughed over the old photograph albums.

I met with the caregivers, who had been saving up all of their concerns since the last time I was there; I cleaned out the back thirty percent of the refrigerator, where I swear I caught a glimpse of Osama Bin Laden, crouched down behind Jimmy Hoffa in an old yogurt container; I looked high and low for my dad's album of photographs from World War II that he has been looking for for about three months. My sister-in-law, my brother Tom's wife, said, "Is it a green album?" It turned out Dad had given it to Tom last spring, but he had forgotten he had done so. When my dad got the album back, he pored over the pictures for a couple of days. Then he said, "Who do you think I should give it to? Do you think Tom would like it?"

My father is a sometime-poet. In fact, poetry is one of the best ways to communicate with him. Sarah's boyfriend, Daniel, wrote a poem about their visit to Florida, which they sent around to the rest of the family afterward in an e-mail. I was struck by all the tender things that Daniel had noticed on their trip: the way the thunder clouds boil up every afternoon, deep purple, over the mangroves; the wide-open beauty of the three barrier islands where my parents live; the raucus bliss of children at what we call the "bathtub beach," a beach encircled by one of the few remaining coral reefs. Jim and Sarah and Daniel had done the really important work with my mom and dad: they had simply enjoyed them.

This morning, we listened in on the encounter between Jesus and a Canaanite woman, who is desperate to find healing for her daughter. It's one of my favorite stories about Jesus. But what really interests me about it is that Matthew and Mark have such different ways of telling the story. Their communities remember the incident very differently. We heard Matthew this morning. In Matthew's telling, Jesus shows a great deal of lordly forbearance toward the Canaanite woman, who keeps shouting at him and the disciples, trying to get them to help her daughter. She knows who Jesus is. She calls him the Lord, the Son of David. "Have mercy on me," she cries.

But in Mark's version, Jesus goes to the region of Tyre and Sidon because he is exhausted. He has been teaching for weeks, arguing with other rabbis, trying to explain to his sometimes thick-headed disciples what he is doing and why. He finds a house where no one knows him, and we gather that he wants to keep it that way for a little while, until he can catch his breath. "Yet he could not escape notice," says Mark. The desperate

mother finds him there and begs him to cast the demon out of her daughter. She doesn't give him any fancy titles, she just gets on her knees and begs.

Both Mark and Matthew remember the shocking thing Jesus said in return, though in Matthew's telling, Jesus gives the woman a chance to back off. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," he says, according to Matthew. Mark remembers that the first thing Jesus said to the woman was, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." When we read this passage at Trinity University, my students never like that line. They want it to go away. Jesus isn't supposed to talk like that. They glare at me as though I made it up myself. But I can't help it. It's there. Jesus calls the woman a dog under the table, sneaking up like our adopted stray, Jasper, to steal the children's food. Luke leaves this story out of his Gospel altogether.

But there it is. And this awkward moment when a tired Jesus snaps at the Gentile woman has become one of my favorite incidents in the Bible. Here the whole salvation story pivots, tilts, and spills out its blessing on anyone who turns toward it. Until this moment, the good news that Jesus has been bringing has been for the Jewish community, for the people who keep the law, the people schooled in righteousness. But even Jesus is surprised when the woman's persistence tips the cup of blessing and out it pours. "Yes, Lord," she says, "But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

What an awkward moment. In Matthew's telling, Jesus regroups, gains his dignity, and says, "'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' And her daughter was healed instantly."

In Mark's telling, we can feel Jesus' astonishment at the woman's gutsiness. "For saying that," he says to her, "For saying that shocking thing, for not backing down, you

may go—the demon has left your daughter.” And then Mark stays with the woman, lets us go home with her, lets us run anxiously to the little girl’s bedside: “So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.”

I remember Mark’s way of telling the story when I, too, am tired. When I don’t want to care for one more person. When I want to sit quietly in a house where no one knows me. God chose a moment like that in the life of Jesus to swing wide open the gates of salvation.

But I need Matthew’s story, too. Matthew never loses sight of the way Jesus was, at every moment, transparent to the life of God. Matthew opens up our point of view so that we are aware of not just what is happening on earth, but how what happens on the earth reveals the heart of heaven wherever Jesus reaches out to heal, or to teach, or to bless. If we could see Matthew’s Gospel acted out, we would notice that there is almost no one who comes into contact with Jesus who does not kneel before him. Moment after moment, Jesus is Lord in Matthew’s Gospel, and I need that lordship, too. Like the Canaanite woman, I need to kneel before the power that holds us all in life.

I need Matthew and Mark each to tell me about Jesus in their own way, because each is true, and each is powerful to save.

Every morning when I was in Florida, I took a long walk across the two huge bridges that span the north and south forks of the St. Lucie River just before it flows into the Atlantic. Because of Daniel’s poem, I paid more attention to what I was seeing and hearing. One morning, as I was nearing the crest of the second bridge, I looked down at a tiny little sand bar, out in the middle of the channel, that had about three mangroves

growing out of it, and several pelicans using it as a base of operations for spotting fish. Then I saw a large shadow in the water, moving toward the sandbar. A head poked up from the shadow, looking almost like a snake's head, but as it rose up out of the water, I saw that it was a large, dark bird, like a great blue heron, but not a heron. It sat on a low branch of the mangrove and spread out its great wings to dry in the breeze. I stayed and stayed to gawk at the bird, such a miraculous, otherworldly, lovely, transcendent creature. I thought of the line from Psalm 104, "And there is that Leviathan, that you made for the sport of it." God must have made this bird for the sheer, heart-stopping delight of it.

When I got home, I described the bird to my father. "That sounds like an Anhinga," he said. And he dug through the pile of books by his chair, pulled out his field guide to birds, found the page with the Anhinga, and handed the book to me. And there was my bird, shown exactly as I had seen him, with his wings spread out to dry. "Anhinga," I repeated.

Like Mark, I need a Jesus who knows what fatigue and disappointment look like up close, a Jesus who doesn't always make incarnation look easy. But, like Matthew, I also need a Jesus who can lift up my sights to the miracle of this world, and to the power of God that works in and through it. Sometimes I need to sit next to Jesus, and sometimes I need to kneel before him. Sometimes, God knows, I need an Anhinga to remind me that there is a glory hidden in everything. And sometimes I need to kneel down and cry out, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David."

In a few moments, we will be baptizing Keira Annelise Gunn into all the fullness of the Gospels, into the realism of Mark *and* the lordliness of Matthew. May she come to know, over time, the full spectrum of God's life in and through her. *Amen.*