

Pentecost 9A; Proper 15

August 14, 2011

Rev Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's

Genesis 45:1-15

Joseph revealed himself to his brothers; forgave them

Psalm 133

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 Paul grieves that Jews do not accept Jesus as the Messiah

Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus heals the daughter of a Canaanite woman

Today's Gospel lesson and one other similar story serve to remind us how important perseverance in faith is to Jesus.

Both stories tell about Jesus finding great faith where he did not expect to find it; Both healings are for Gentiles, even though Jesus felt called to minister first to the Jews.

In Matt 8:5-13, a Roman officer asked Jesus to heal his servant. The Roman said, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come into my home. Just say the word from where you are, and my servant will be healed!" Jesus said about the Roman officer, "I haven't seen faith like this in all the land of Israel!"

In Matt 15:21-28, the Canaanite woman asked Jesus to heal her daughter. After he gave her a rather cutting refusal, she said, "Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table". Jesus said, "Woman, great is your faith!"

The Gentile woman changed Jesus' mind about healing her daughter. Clearly Jesus was not coerced into healing her daughter. He was overwhelmed at the depth and persistence of her faith.

Some theologians reject the idea that Jesus would ever change his mind. He is God; and knows the plan of his life from before he was born. So he would never change his mind. I don't see it that way. I see Jesus' human nature discovering that his mission is to engage people, any people, in deepening their faith.

It just does not work for us to put God, or the Son of God, in a box. It doesn't work to say that he only came for the Jews, or for the Catholics, or the evangelicals, or the charismatics, or the liberals, or the oppressed, or Episcopalians. God created our diversity, and celebrates it.

As much as we try to figure God out, and as much as we should try to learn about God, no 'rule' we come up with, for who is 'in' and who is 'out'; nothing will deny God's compassionate response to great faith.

In this conversation with the Canaanite woman, Jesus changed his mind. And instead of a ministry only targeted at the faith of Israel, his vision grew to include every human being who would show faith. Jesus moved from saying here, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel", to saying "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." (Matt 28:19).

Signs of perseverance in faith as a community;

- 5 vicars/rectors in 37 years – 7.4 year average
- 34 years as a mission, at least 3 tries to become a parish
- Long periods, as much as a few years, with only supply clergy
- Controversial teachings about charismatics, faith healing
- Surviving an arsonist trying to burn the building down
- In past years, despite a lack of funding from the operating budget, established the preschool; built new play ground; new secure storage shed; got new lawn tractor, push mower, trimmer and blower; new altar; chalices; RCL Gospel and Lectionary books; two audio systems; recording and posting of all sermons in audio and text; new web presence, FB, Shutterfly, blog posts; new bell tower; new acolyte albs; newly remodeled Sitting Room.
- This year; despite lack of funding from the operating budget; fallen trees removed, pavement repair at entrance, replaced stolen sign, repair and upgrade of lawn irrigation, major clearing of community garden debris.

Signs of perseverance in faith as individuals;

- Attendance and support of our church when things are tough; busy, financially tight, conflicted, or changed (music, leadership)
- Keeping personal faith life of study, prayer; when life is busy, when God seems far away or silent, when things are going well.
- When it seems like prayers are unanswered.

A message from the lessons today is that God responds to perseverance of faith. This involves more than simply enduring bad situations, but overcoming them with obedience and hope and joy that God is with us.

We can develop persistence in faith by;

1. following God even when it doesn't seem to make sense or to produce results.
2. realizing that struggles in our life might just be there to build our character; to become more Christ-like.
3. remembering that our goal is to live with God in heaven, forever.
4. seeing the example of the Canaanite woman, whose perseverance led to healing.

Our Holy Scriptures report that amazing things happen when we demonstrate perseverance in our faith. Our call today is to build up our awareness of God being active in our life, to keep strong in faith, claiming God's love for ourselves every day. Amen.