

Sermon – September 5, 2021
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
(Proper 18 – Year B)
Trinity Church Boston
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The Work of Love

*Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heav'n, to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling....*

Love's dwelling is always humble. And on this Labor Day weekend it is important to remember that the creation of a dwelling place for love is always a matter of labor. Holy, lifelong labor.

It is part of the human condition to be shaped, consciously and unconsciously, by assumptions and prejudgments about others, and perhaps especially about others who are different from us. We, and all who share human flesh with us, make assumptions, and prejudgments. And since Jesus shared our flesh, our humanity, like us, he was subject to the assumptions and prejudgments of his time and place, just as we are subject to the assumptions and prejudgments of our time and place.

Not only do we prejudge and make assumptions about others, we also know what it is like for others to prejudge us, to make assumptions about us. About our intelligence or lack thereof, or the rightness or unworthiness of our values. About what talents or lack of potential we might have. Or where the trajectory of our life might take us, or what destiny we are doomed to fulfill.

I'm sure you can think of times when you've misjudged another, and you can remember times when you have been dismissed by the assumptions others have had about you. And we know this experience not only from relative strangers, but also from those nearest to us, the ones we assumed loved us and had our best interests at heart. Or the figures we looked up to – parents, teachers, coaches, clergy, doctors, or other leaders we expected the best of.

Two such misjudgments come to mind from my childhood. One from my lovely mother, and another from my beloved grandmother, my mother's dear mother.

First, my mother and her prejudgment. Then, as now, I loved singing in church. But standing next to me when I was a child, as she sang with her rich alto near- perfect-pitch voice, my mother decided I was tone deaf (like my father) because when I could not hit the note of a hymn, I shifted into a different key. As a result she decided that, unlike my three other siblings, I should not be given piano lessons, because my "tin ear" would make it a waste of time and money.

And my grandmother. I remember the soul-expanding feeling I had when, as a first grader, I first experienced puppy love. On the way home from school, in my excitement, I stopped by my

grandmother's house to tell her I was in love with Frankie. She was utterly undone, and told me that loving and marrying Frankie just wasn't possible. And by the way, this was not because Frankie was a boy. Frankie was the cutest blond girl in first grade, and the best jump-roper to boot. Grandmother was horrified because Frankie was a Catholic, and in her West Virginia Baptist way she just didn't have space for me to love someone who wasn't a Protestant.

The Jesus we meet at the beginning of today's Gospel was just as human in his prejudgments and assumptions as my mother and grandmother. He had a picture in his mind and heart of what was right and what was wrong, who was worthy of God's favor and who wasn't, and he seems also to have had an assumption about where and with whom God wanted the Messiah, the Anointed One, to focus his energy, his ministry, his love. And a Syro-Phoenician woman was not on the list of the worthy, nor was she among those he assumed were to be within the bounds of the community that he called the kingdom of God. She was of another kingdom – not God's. Some modern scholars have seen her as triply excluded from the focus of Jesus' original sense of his mission: excluded because she was a woman; excluded because she was a Gentile, a pagan believer in false gods; and excluded because she was of a people who were hereditary enemies of Jews. (Remember it was Antiochus Epiphanes IV, the ruler of Syria-Phoenicia after the break-up of Alexander's Empire, who overran Jerusalem and was responsible for the ultimate desecration of sacrificing a pig on the altar in the Temple's Holy of Holies.)

And so, though she begs Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter, Jesus refuses by putting her in her place, saying: "Let the children (in other words, the children of Israel) be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." In effect, he dismisses this woman, who has asked for his help, as a dog. Notice he doesn't even speak directly to her. He speaks over her, as if she were merely one of a pack of dogs, unworthy of his attention.

By the way, some have tried to soften Jesus' response and rescue him from his cutting response by saying the Greek word for "dogs" really means "puppies." No dice, I'm afraid. He refers to her as a dog. And in his culture dogs weren't beloved pets. They were despised and spurned, because they ran in wild packs scavenging what they could at the edge of human settlements.

And she knows that's what Jesus means because her witty reply plays off this very understanding of dogs. She says in effect that Jesus is right, but.... "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." *You're right Jesus. I'm scavenging for whatever I can get for my daughter, even if it is a mere crumb of your attention, your healing ministry, your love.*

And something snaps inside Jesus. A miracle takes place, and it is every bit as great as Jesus' healings of others. As in the story that follows this one, and that we also heard this morning, something opens up inside Jesus. Her word – not her saying – but her **word** changes him. This pagan woman, this pagan enemy's word changes God's Word made flesh. For the Greek here that Jesus uses in this story is *logos*, the very exalted word that John's Gospel uses of Jesus when it says the **word**, God's Word, became flesh and dwelt among. Something changes in Jesus and

opens up. His ministry pivots, and he not only heals this woman's daughter, but his self-understanding undergoes a revolution.

It is as if Jesus hears God speaking to him through this woman. She becomes God's word to him, God's *logos*, and he realizes that he was wrong about the scope of his mission. He was NOT sent just to the children of Israel. He is NOT to be God's Word, God's Messiah, God's savior and redeemer for just one part of God's creation. He is opened up to the awesome possibility, the awesome **reality** that he has been sent to her, and to her people, and to all the people of the earth.

What triggered his widened heart? What broke open his stony heart? We will never know, because Mark's Gospel doesn't tell us what Jesus thought and felt. But I will tell you where my imagination has taken me when I ask, "Just what happened here to break Jesus open?" I imagine that for a moment, the picture of a dog under the child's table reminded Jesus of some of the first words from God in the first book of his Scripture, his Bible and ours. I imagine that Jesus glimpsed the shattering truth that Genesis proclaims. The mind-and-heart-rending truth that everything that is, everything that exists, yes, even despised dogs and feared pagan enemies were made by God and declared "good" even "very good." For that anvil chorus of Genesis Chapter One keeps sounding a kind of first covenant of love and goodness. That God made everything that is, even things and people we fear, even things and people we assume are not worthy, even things and people we assume are not worth investing time and energy in because they are tone-deaf or of a different religious group with a different set of values from ours. They were ALL made by God, and ALL declared good by God, and if they were made by God, and declared good by God, then who are we to call them anything less. They are worthy of attention, of ministry, of love. And if all we can give at first is a crumb of attention, or ministry, or love, then that is a starting place. And from it can grow a kingdom of love that will break open every heart until we **and** the despised dogs of our world are One and united at the throne of the One who is God's Word, willing to welcome us too, who have been wrong, and close-minded, and hard-hearted. And where all will eat at One Table, and none will have to scavenge for mere crumbs. Because the love of God is pure compassion, pure unbounded love. Thanks be to God. So who will be the one this week who will speak, who will be God's word made flesh for you? Who will be your Syro-phoenician woman? Who will break open your closed mind and mine, and widen the love of our hard hearts? Be assured of this. She will stand before you. Maybe she is right next to you now....

Finish then [in us] thy new creation, Love Divine. So we may – not just in heaven, but here also – be lost in wonder, love, and praise of your great Love. And work together with you to live out that Love.

Amen.

