

August 20, 2023

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Reverend Joseph Kimmel
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Matthew 15:10-28



I want to invite all of us to think back for a second on the best teacher you ever had. Who comes to mind? When you think of a really good teacher, which person pops into your brain? Maybe someone from early in grade school like a kindergarten teacher—or perhaps later in life, a college professor, for instance? What was it that made that teacher special for you? What qualities of that person distinguish them in your mind?

There are many possible reasons why we might cherish a particular teacher: maybe the person was exceptionally caring, or provided critical guidance during a difficult time of life, or was particularly gifted at expanding your perspective, inspiring you to think in new ways. The famous 20th-century theologian CS Lewis had a beloved professor whom he nicknamed “The Great Knock.” This “Great Knock”—actually named William Kirkpatrick—tutored Lewis to prepare him for his undergraduate studies at Oxford. Lewis was so impacted by Kirkpatrick’s influence that Lewis devotes an entire chapter to this teacher in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*. In this chapter, Lewis describes in detail his first eye-opening encounter with the “Great Knock.” Having heard that Kirkpatrick was a fairly elderly man who enjoyed gardening, Lewis expected to meet a mellow, easygoing fellow who at best would impart a few life lessons before Lewis headed off for his “real education” at Oxford. But, Lewis explains, his expectations were rapidly dashed: at their very first meeting outside a certain train station, Lewis and Kirkpatrick exchanged typical greetings and then began to walk towards the teacher’s study in a town called Bookham. “You are now,” Kirkpatrick informed the young Lewis, “proceeding along the main road between Great and Little Bookham.” “I,” writes Lewis, “then remarked that I was surprised at the surrounding scenery; it was much ‘wilder’ than I had expected.” “Stop!” shouted Kirkpatrick with a suddenness that made me jump. “What do you mean by ‘wildness’ and what grounds had you for not expecting it?”

Taken aback, a suddenly flummoxed Lewis stammered “I, I don’t know...I [was just] making conversation.” Lewis then describes how the scene played out: “As answer after answer was torn to shreds it at last dawned upon me that he really wanted to know. He was not “making conversation,” nor joking, nor snubbing me; he wanted to know. I was stung into attempting

a real answer. A few passes sufficed to show that I had no clear and distinct idea corresponding to the word ‘wildness,’ and that, in so far as I had any idea at all, ‘wildness’ was a singularly inept word. ‘Do you not see, then,’ concluded the Great Knock, ‘that your remark was meaningless?’”

Lewis closes his description of this initial discussion by noting: “By this time our acquaintance had lasted about three and a half minutes; but the tone set by this first conversation was preserved without a single break during all the years I spent at Bookham.”

This rather shocking first interaction marked Lewis’ baptism by fire into the pedagogical methods of the “Great Knock,” a teacher whom Lewis would later describe as the man who taught him how to think. Lewis’ high regard and tremendous gratitude for the “Great Knock” shines through in a letter he wrote years later where he says that “in the intellectual sphere” he owed to Kirkpatrick “as much as one human being can owe another.”

Though their relationship got off to an awkward start, Lewis in time came to cherish Kirkpatrick as a life-changing teacher, certainly not because of any kindness or personal guidance offered by Kirkpatrick, but because of how he challenged Lewis, sometimes quite roughly, to fully develop his first-rate mind. Kirkpatrick refined Lewis’ mind, putting it through an intellectual fire so as to emerge purer, sharper, and more incisive on the other side.

In our challenging Gospel reading this morning, there are many ways to interpret what Jesus is provocatively doing in his encounter with the Canaanite woman. “Did Jesus, of all people, just call this woman a dog?,” we very well might be wondering. One of the more persuasive interpretations, I believe, of what’s happening in this odd conversation is that Jesus here is adopting something like the “Great Knock” method for the benefit of both his disciples (his students) and more generally for the huge crowds of onlookers.

What is it that causes Jesus to adopt this role with its provocative, even insulting, responses? With his profound insight into the hearts of those around him, Jesus seems to see something very significant in the woman’s persistence: she knows her cause—on behalf of her daughter—is righteous and

just; she is full of faith and trust; and she will not be denied. And therefore, ironically because she is able to persist, Jesus chooses to delay, rather than acting immediately, to heal her child.

Now importantly, this is not the only time Jesus waits to help someone in need. Jesus also delays in John's gospel, when he hears that his friend Lazarus is very sick and then inexplicably waits until Lazarus dies before going to see him: in both Lazarus' case and in today's passage, Jesus' delay initially seems rather cold and heartless; when it's in your power to heal, why let your friend die? Why let a child suffer even one more minute at the hands of a demon?

Jesus, the great Teacher, often espouses values that can be difficult for us to swallow. We see a need, and typically we want to help; we see someone sick, and we want to make them better. Throughout the Gospels we see Jesus making a lot of people better, but physical healing is not the primary value or goal of Jesus' mission. The disciples share our frustration. In our reading this morning, we hear them tell Jesus "send her away," but importantly, "send her [i.e., the mother] away" could also be translated as "set her [i.e., the daughter] free." In other words, with this translation, the disciples express their dismay with Jesus by asking him, "Jesus, why are you dilly-dallying? Just heal the girl and let's get on with things; stop delaying and give this mother what she seeks."

But Jesus sees something powerful in this woman and he wants to draw it out, wants to bring it more fully into the light for the benefit of all—especially his disciples, his students—to see. So first he ignores the woman; she persists. Then he says he's sent only to "the house of Israel" (the Jews), meaning that she, as a Canaanite, is not eligible for his help; she persists. Finally, he appeals to what is fair and just, insulting her in the process by implying that she is a mere dog and that it would be unjust to help a dog before one's children; again, she does not grow discouraged or give up in anger; she stays committed to her righteous cause and persists. And it is only now after overcoming this third obstacle put in her path by Jesus that the woman finally receives the goal of her persistent efforts: Jesus praises her tremendous faith and then immediately heals her daughter.

Again this torturous process might strike us as cruel: why make the mother jump through all these hoops to get help for her sick child? It's difficult to know exactly what Jesus' rationale is here, but (as in the case of Lazarus) Jesus recognizes a tremendous opportunity, and master Teacher that he is, he takes full advantage of it, probing the woman's heart, drawing out her perseverance through provocative statements that reveal to all the onlookers the depth of this woman's faith. By putting her and her child through this agonizing process, Jesus ultimately brings a blessing not only to them alone but also to the crowd, who hear the back-and-forth between the woman and Jesus, who hear from the woman's own lips the kind of perseverance and faith and commitment to a righteous cause so valued by Jesus.

What would the crowds have lost if Jesus had just healed immediately? How would the individual onlookers have missed out if they hadn't witnessed Jesus, the master Teacher, drawing out the woman's faith, highlighting it through his provocative statements, pulling out her perseverance and displaying it for all to see, an object lesson in the kind of faith, trust, and commitment that leads to sudden, miraculous change?

Our world, our country suffers from a range of problems we know only too well. We might often wonder what in the world is God doing. Why doesn't God do something? We bring our concerns to Christ in prayer, we try to take meaningful actions in our daily lives to be the change we want to see. And yet, the oceans still rise, the globe grows warmer, the vulnerable still suffer, and the powerful elite fly around in private jets with golden parachutes. I bet the daughter of the Canaanite woman also wondered why Jesus wouldn't just do something, why Jesus, if he were so powerful, wouldn't just say a word and swiftly relieve her suffering, immediately fix her world. But there was a method to Jesus' "madness," there was a plan behind Jesus' provocative pedagogy. While we cannot presume to know Jesus' full reasoning, his dialogue with the Canaanite woman can help us to trust that he knows what he is doing. Expert Teacher that he is, he delays the healing, waits to bring the change, until an even greater benefit is realized by all those onlookers who just enjoyed a front-row seat in a master class on the power of faith.

To be sure, in the end change does—and will—come: in Jesus' perfect time, the daughter is healed. And that hope for change at just the right time is our hope as Christians as well. When faced with the option to despair, we choose instead to follow the Canaanite woman and persist: to persist in believing that righteousness—and not greed—will ultimately triumph; to persist in our conviction that life—and not death—will (even after death) have the last word; to persist in working to heal our world rather than hopelessly letting it tear itself apart.

It takes hope, commitment, faith, trust, and perseverance not to throw up our hands in despair—but this is the hope of the Canaanite woman, the hope that Jesus' drew out of her for all to see, a hope that can also be our hope as we take a cue from this unnamed woman and, day-in and day-out, call upon our God with persistent faith. Amen.

