

Sermon (8/20/17, Matthew 15: 10-28):

In the mid 1980s, National Lampoon released a film called ‘Vacation’ starring Chevy Chase as an overly optimistic, well-meaning, disaster prone father who was determined to provide his family, the Griswolds, a vacation they would never forget. It ended up being just that but for all the wrong reasons.

In one scene, Chevy Chase, playing Clark Griswold, mistakenly takes a wrong exit which lands them in a clearly dangerous part of urban America. As they ride down the street in their conspicuous Wagon Queen Family Truckster with eight headlights and a pea green finish, Clark tells the family to lock their doors as they see small fires burning along the sidewalks, prostitutes trying to wave them down, and a host of other criminal behavior that screams danger from every side.

Realizing how hopelessly lost they were, Clark eventually pulls the car over to ask a group of young people for directions. The person he asks was more than accommodating, taking his time to explain the assorted options Clark had to get back on the right track. In the meantime, while Clark is occupied by this discussion, the car they were in is quickly stripped-hub caps popped off, tires removed, headlights and backlights pulled off. By the time the conversation is over, their car is propped up on cinder blocks and the Griswolds are going nowhere fast.

The Director of this movie later regretted this fictional scene that supposedly took place in East St. Louis. It ended up giving this area an unwarranted bad reputation. It is, none the less, an all too common reality. Residents tend to learn quickly those areas that garner a fearsome reputation.

For the past number of weeks, the lectionary has had us fishing around in the 14th and now 15th chapters of Matthew. We have witnessed the horrific death of Jesus’ beloved friend, John the Baptist. We have watched Jesus feed over 5,000 people with just a few small loaves of bread and a couple of fish. We have reflected on the passage about Jesus walking on water and now we move on to meet a Canaanite mother who won’t take ‘no’ for an answer, even from Jesus!

At the outset of this story, we’re told this encounter takes place in an

area called the district of Sidon and Tyre. Back in Jesus' day, just mentioning this area would have garnered alarm. Sidon and Tyre was considered a dangerous wasteland that a Hebrew would not go for fear of losing life and limb. A definite wrong exit.

Today's story is a hard one to take. It shows a side of Jesus that is not all that flattering. It's one that we would rather forget, trading it in for more comforting images like the shepherd who would lay down his life for the sheep or the playful Jesus welcoming children to come near.

'Jesus left that place and went to the district of Tyre and Sidon.' Why he made such a trip is a mystery. Almost immediately he is confronted by one of its natives, a Canaanite woman.

'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' Somehow even this woman, a citizen of a land loathed and feared by the Hebrew people, has heard of Jesus. She calls him 'Son of David' recognizing his Jewish heritage and, apparently, she has heard the stories of his ability to heal.

At first, Jesus says nothing. He doesn't even acknowledge her existence. The disciples accompanying Jesus, quickly grow agitated by the woman's persistence. Annoyed, they implore Jesus to shush her away.

Jesus turns around and curtly tells the woman: 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.'

The words are few but what is being said is significant. Jesus is essentially announcing that his mission is limited to the Hebrew people, God's chosen ones, no one else. Yes, Jesus seems to be drawing lines as to who is in and who is out, who counts and who doesn't count. This is a very difficult passage.

The Canaanite woman doesn't take 'no' for an answer. This is, after all, not about herself but about her ill daughter and you know what they say about not provoking a Mama bear.

This Canaanite woman is not about to let Jesus brush her off so quickly and easily. She stands her ground. She is sharp and strong. She will not be silenced because she knows that if she walks away she could very well lose her beloved child.

She also knows that Jesus is who he says he is, which is very

interesting given the episode that just preceded this. That story features those who *are* a part of Jesus' self-proclaimed mission, namely the Pharisees and scribes. Yet, they are the ones who fussed, fumed, and rejected Jesus for something as small as Jesus not making his disciples observe Jewish sanitary laws before they ate. While the Pharisees and Scribes played Jesus' mother by demanding he wash his hands before he ate, the Canaanite Woman came to Jesus as a mother, believing Jesus to be Savior and Lord. The difference is striking.

'Lord, help me.' Kyrie Eleison. 'Lord, have mercy.' Kyrie Eleison. The Canaanite woman persisted as she knelt before Jesus pleading her case on behalf of her daughter.

'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' Jesus strongly retorts. The words leave us stunned. Is this our beloved Jesus? Has he just compared this poor woman to a dog? Sadly, he has and it's as bad as it sounds. It bears the same cruel harshness as a voice hurling the word 'dog' at a girl in a high school corridor.

A popular jingle repeated by the very young says, 'sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me'. I don't know who came up with that but its dead wrong...words hurt, words cut deep, words have a way of lodging themselves in our souls like a tick buries itself deep in the skin to release its poison.

We don't want these words coming from the mouth of Jesus. Is Jesus a racist? Is Jesus rejecting this woman's plea simply because of her ethnicity? How crushing this passage is for us especially in this time when racist concerns in our country seem to have moved from a slow simmer to a full boil.

Again, this brave woman whom we can't help but to admire, does not wilt away. 'Yes, Lord,' She says in response. 'But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.'

She does not accost Jesus for the miserable way he has treated her, though it would have been understandable if she had. Instead, she accepts her relegation and shrewdly responds with words that seem to stun Jesus into new consciousness. The teacher is being taught. The challenger of traditions and loveless ways is being challenged. It is a controversial thing

to say but it is the impression we are left with.

We profess, rightfully so, I believe, that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. How those two realities wrestled with each other inside of Jesus is beyond our ability to comprehend.

Yet, it is such a fundamental part of being human to grow, to learn, to change one's mind as one's perspectives are broadened and one's experiences become one's teacher. From the early days when we first learn to walk, to realizing the hard way that bumble bees sting when you hold them in your hand, to realizing that maybe we aren't as invincible as we thought during the days of our youth, to discovering the fragility of life in and through our encounters with loss, we learn. We learn every day. We grow all the time and many times that growing comes with growing pains. It is a fundamental part of being human.

Might this have also been the case for the fully human/fully divine Jesus? Might this encounter with the Canaanite woman been a powerful, eye-opening experience for Jesus, leading him to realize that his mission was meant to include Gentiles, even Canaanite Gentiles, as much as the Hebrew people? Might the reason the Spirit had led Jesus to Tyre and Sidon, as it led him to the wilderness after his baptism, was so that he might hear this important lesson from this most unlikely of teachers?

It is interesting to note the humility of Jesus in this story. It seems that Jesus is big enough not to be ashamed to acknowledge this new insight precipitated by this outcast Canaanite woman. Jesus seems to move from gruff annoyance to joyful discovery as he declares, 'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!' And, instantly, her daughter was healed.

I don't know why Jesus ended up taking this wrong exit to a wasteland called the district of Tyre and Sidon. Did the Spirit drive him there? Is it us who need this story more than Jesus did?

We live in such an us-versus-them time. We are so strongly loathe to interact with the other whom we have outcast to the wastelands of our self-imposed fears. We are so defiantly caught up in our own narrow ideologies and perspectives that we reject anything and everything that is contrary to them for no other reason than they are contrary. We are seeing

things in our streets we thought we had left in our long past like white supremacists chanting ‘Jews will not replace us’ and torch carrying Neo-Nazis with their straight-armed salutes. It’s scary. Our parents and grandparents sacrificed much, in many cases even their lives, to fight a war meant to stop such ethnic hatred. Hate dies a hard death.

Perhaps, what we desperately need is a lot more turns onto wrong exits leading us to places we have deemed unsalvageable. Perhaps we need to sit at tables with those we have relegated to licking up crumbs around our feet. Perhaps, we need to pray that the Spirit might lead us to an encounter with one as other, as brave, as courageous, and as wise as the Canaanite woman who cried out to Jesus, forcing him to see her. It is a lot easier to condemn the other when that other doesn’t have a face, a name, a story, a life as real as our own. Perhaps, we need to be humble like Jesus was, realizing that sometimes the best teachers are those whom we least expect have something to teach to us. We are human after all and as humans if we are not willing and able to learn and grow along the way we are sadly destined to repeat the same horrors and mistakes we have made in the past.

To God alone be all the glory!