

Matthew 15: 21-28

On Wednesday, I heard that Reverend Amy Current was elected to be the next bishop of the Southeastern Iowa Synod. I met Rev. Current when I was a student at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque. She is presently the Vice President for Admissions and Student Services, there. She was ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in 1997.

To be nominated for the position of bishop, one must be a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the ELCA. Rev. Current's election reminded me that this year the ELCA is celebrating the 50/40/10 Anniversary. The anniversary numbers pertain to the years in which the ELCA, or its predecessor denominations, began allowing women to be ordained. The "50" stands for the number of years in which white women have been ordained. The "40" stands for the number of years in which women of color have been ordained. The "10" stands for the number of years in which women who identify as LGBTQIA+ have been ordained.

Much has changed in terms of equality and justice in the ELCA in the past 50 years. Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton has served in this important leadership role in the ELCA since 2013, being reelected to a second 6-year term in 2019. We are seeing more women elected as bishops, serving as pastors, and in the seminaries. Although I could not find an exact number, based on my time at Wartburg Theological Seminary, I would estimate that half of the current seminary students are women. With thousands of churches throughout the United States currently without pastors, we recognize the importance of women in ministry for the sake of God's church.

Our gospel passage for today is located in the Bible after the feeding of the 5,000 men, plus women and children. It is located after the story of Jesus and Peter walking on water. These gospel passages of the past few weeks remind us of the place of women in the 1st Century. Women were not included in the 5,000, but were listed as "extras." They were fed, but were not

included in the numbers that are often referred to as Jesus' "Feeding the 5,000." They were not included with the 12 disciples, even though there were many women Christ Followers. Perhaps this was due to propriety, since Jesus' disciples traveled and stayed in homes. Mixing males and females would not have been seen as proper. As to women's voices being heard, they were often silenced. Some might even say that at the time when Peter walked on water, women were not in the boat.

In Matthew 15, verse 21, when our pericope begins, we find that a woman, a Canaanite woman, has come to Jesus, shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." The disciples are tired of her persistent calls and ask Jesus to send her away. Like most women of this time, she did not have a voice in her culture or any other culture. Decisions were made for her. What was spoken on her behalf was to be stated by her husband if she was married, or by her father or another male relative, if she was unmarried. She, was expected to be silent. She was also a Canaanite woman, whose people were historical enemies of Israel. But, we know that Jesus had 3 women in his genealogy who were Canaanite women: Rahab, Tamar, and Ruth (Matthew 1: 3,5). And this Canaanite woman, was a woman who felt the need to speak-up for herself, her child, and her culture. We know that she has faith in Jesus, because she calls Jesus, "Lord," and the "Son of David." Jesus recognizes her faith.

As we look to the disciples, we can imagine the friction between them and this woman. We appear to be witnessing their patriarchal upbringing which downplays a women's voice. We are perhaps also witnessing the disciples' lack of faith. For Jesus often refers to the disciples as having "little faith." As such, they may not recognize the great faith that this woman has in Jesus.

We look to Jesus, perhaps expecting him to demonstrate his mercy and compassion for

the woman and her child. But, that does not happen, at first. Instead, we hear Jesus say, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus has demonstrated his mercy and compassion by healing many men, women and children in the crowds in the recent past. Yet, Jesus appears to be telling her that he was not sent to help her and her child; that he was not sent to help a Canaanite, but rather, only to help the Israelites! We hang on Jesus' words. Perhaps as the "Son of David," of the lineage of King David of Israel, he feels his obligation to the Israelites. But the woman is persistent. Her faith in Jesus and Jesus' power, encourages her to ask Jesus to intervene for the sake of her daughter. She continues her plea, kneeling before Jesus, saying, "Lord, help me."

Jesus, states, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Unlike some other cultures, the Canaanites had dogs that were pets. Per Mitzi Smith (Working Preacher, 2020) "The Canaanite woman's cultural context differs from Jesus'; they allow their pets to be fed while the children eat." The woman replies, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Jesus has more than enough power for the Israelites and those of other cultures, too. Jesus' power is beyond measure. He replies, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as your wish." And her daughter was instantly healed.

Jesus came for the Israelites, but he did not deny the request of this woman who was a Canaanite. Jesus demonstrated his mercy and compassion for her and her daughter. For those who have faith in Jesus, even those who many be devalued or whose voices have been silenced, Jesus has mercy and compassion for them, too. When a voice that has long been silenced is heard, we experience a sense of God's kingdom promoting justice and peace.

In Holy Baptism, parents who are presenting their babies and young children who are not able to answer for themselves, acknowledge these responsibilities:

to live with them among God's faithful people.
bring them to the word of God and the holy supper,
teach them the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments,
place in their hands the holy scriptures,
and nurture them in faith and prayer,
so that your children may learn to trust God,
proclaim Christ through word and deed,
care for others and the world God made,
and work for justice and peace.

This message is not limited, nor does it pertain to only those children and parents who are of certain races, cultures, ethnicities, genders, or other qualifiers. Rather, this message is a message of justice and peace. It is the message of our pericope, today, as well.

We have made progress in the ELCA in our efforts to bring greater equality and inclusion for women in ministry, but there is more work to be done and progress to be made in other areas. There is progress to be made in helping persons to know that Jesus' message is for all. Jesus came to earth for the sake of all humanity. Jesus died on the cross for all humanity. Jesus calls us to "care for others and the world God made, and [to]work for justice and peace." (Holy Baptism liturgy) We are called to welcome all who want to learn about Jesus and know of his saving grace! For yet while we were sinners, Jesus died so that all who believe in him might have everlasting life with him. This is the good news! Through Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven and we become new people. In Jesus Christ, all may come to know of Jesus' mercy and compassion. Through God all things are possible. Thanks be to God. Amen.