

“Unsearchable Judgments, Inscrutable Ways”

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship

August 17, 2008

*“O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How **unsearchable** are his judgments and how **inscrutable** his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. AMEN” Romans 11:33-35*

Have you ever been disqualified? Have you ever been deemed ineligible? In this season of the Summer Olympics, qualification and eligibility for athletic events quickly come to mind. The sports pages contain – no matter what the sport - articles of accusation of misdeeds by athletes, their trainers and coaching staff – even their fans! (fanatics) These missteps, these infractions, result in disqualification and penalty.

Ineligibility and disqualification are a risk in any contest. Fancheon, no doubt, has learned to pay close attention to the fine print when she enters a baking or sewing contest. Many a 4-H member has been disappointed to discover that their project was rejected simply because the specifications hadn’t been carefully attended to – a poster too large, not enough muffins on the plate...

We can be disqualified by “jumping the gun” too many times. We can “foul out” by playing too roughly. We can be removed from a contest by being a “bad sport.” We’ve broken the rules and now we find ourselves on the sidelines. (not spoken)

However, I’ve started somewhere in the middle of the story – with several privileged assumptions – . In order to be disqualified in such cases, one was first of all - *qualified*. The athlete, the baker, the student, the musician, each was able, each was welcome to bring his/her skills and talents to share.

This is the posture of a privileged people. We seek to participate. We hone our skills. We arrive prepared! What a great opportunity! We needn’t fear disqualification unless we disregard the accepted rules.

Our gospel text for this evening, however, describes for us a “disqualified, ineligible *person*.” She is not disqualified as an athlete, as a musician, as a 4-H member. She is declared ineligible simply because of her DNA. We’re told that she is a Canaanite, a woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon. (Mark describes her as a Gentile of Syrophenician origin more neutrally based on geography. Matthew tells us of a Canaanite woman- an outdated adjective, but one laden with ancient memories of contempt!) The woman comes to Jesus, seeking his help for her daughter. She confesses his Lordship. She kneels before him in humility. She longs to connect with the family of God. Yet, she is shooed away as a nuisance, a bother. She is disregarded as an alien. She is disqualified solely on the basis - not of her disregard for any rules – but because of her personhood. She is disqualified because of where she comes from, because of *who she is*. She is a Canaanite. She is a woman, she is an outsider (which according to the “rules” makes her unclean). She is noisy, she is expendable. She’s a nobody. She **can** be

“Unsearchable Judgments, Inscrutable Ways”

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship

August 17, 2008

disregarded and ignored because – *as everyone knows* - by her very personhood she is ineligible for Jesus’ attention.

How strange...how troubling... to find Jesus caught up in this tangled place of border crossings. What is this story doing in the Gospels?

The Bible has many stories about “nobodies!” From the very early covenant with Abraham, we find a weak, wandering people seeking after God’s leading. Psalm 105 describes the people of Israel as a people, “few in number, of little account, and strangers wandering from nation to nation.” Famine has sent the sons of Jacob to Egypt in search of food – more than once! They are aliens seeking hospitality far from home, coming out, seeking help – in the face of starvation. Yet, how easily we forget when privilege returns!

We’ve been following the stumbling faithfulness of the “chosen people” as they balance – in tight-rope- fashion - the task of *being a people* along with *birthing a new way of being for all people* In past weeks together, we’ve heard of the clumsy, misguided, yet amazingly faithful and committed, response of this people to the covenant between God – and their people, the people of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We sense their struggles as they find themselves *a nascent people, a budding people, a fledgling community* – and at the very same time, a people charged with the purpose of bearing witness to the blessings of God; bearing the blessings of God to *all peoples*. That’s a lot to deal with. As Emmaus Road Mennonite, we, too, are a new people seeking identity **and** desiring to bring blessing to the wider world! It’s a challenge!

Tonight’s text from Matthew fits perfectly into the “fits and starts” of the 1<sup>st</sup> Testament. Tonight’s text fits perfectly into the “fits and starts” of a budding fellowship!

Jesus heads north to Tyre and Sidon after his time near the Sea of Galilee – teaching, healing, feeding...(feeding of 5000) The gospel text tells us “he left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. As he headed into Phoenicia, is it surprising that he would meet up with a Phoenician woman? Why wouldn’t such a woman be out and about...Jesus is on her territory? She *comes out* from the place of her daily living and calls out to Jesus for mercy. The woman isn’t just taking a stab in the dark regarding this visitor. She recognizes Jesus for who he is and cries out to him as Lord. Jesus is out of his accustomed place; the woman casts aside her daily chores, *coming out* from whatever would cause her to remain hidden, seeking an encounter with Jesus. Jesus and the “Canaanite woman” meet. But we know much more...she is not simply a foreigner labeled with a derogatory, dehumanizing label, she is a mother deeply concerned for the life of her child, a woman and a mother willing to defy any obstacle in order to find healing for her daughter. Jesus... had crossed over into Phoenician territory – Jesus also – like the woman – “breaks out” from his usual circle of comfort. An off-balance, clumsy

“Unsearchable Judgments, Inscrutable Ways”

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship

August 17, 2008

encounter results **and** all emerge transformed because of it. (Including Jesus and his disciples.)

From a distance, the woman sees Jesus. She calls out for his attention, speaking loudly, determined to get a response from him. Jesus, surrounded more closely by his disciples is silent. The text states, “He did not answer her at all.” Just as in past predicaments, the disciples are quick to offer a solution to this problem... “send her away.” They always seem to speak so quickly! (Remember these same words when evening fell on the crowds and suppertime neared! Or when the children gathered around him?) A seemingly disjointed dialogue continues...yet maybe it isn’t so disjointed. Jesus responds to the disciples saying he was sent to the lost sheep of Israel. (see Mt.10) Let’s listen carefully to these words as Jesus responds to the disciples. Let’s hear them alongside his response as the disciples recommended the very same thing regarding the hungry crowds. The disciples had come to Jesus saying, “Send them away...they’re going to get hungry...” Jesus had responded, “They don’t need to go away, **you** feed them.” I’ve always loved that part of the story! It would have been one thing for Jesus to say, “O, they don’t need to go away, **I’ll** feed them.” It is quite another to have him say, “O, they don’t need to go away, **you** feed them!”

Jesus’ response is the same; his words a bit different. Through the pen of the Gospel writer, Jesus’ life and ministry are unfolding for the new community. Imagine the folks of the first century listening to these oral accounts that were being told and retold as word traveled from one place to another. What a dramatic story! The community is at a pivotal point – who’s in, who’s out. It’s theirs to live out. As the woman calls out to Jesus, as the disciples grumble and wish to send her away, Jesus responds to the disciples with the words, “I’ve come to the lost sheep of Israel...” I wonder if the story teller paused allowing folks to feel the rising tension in the tale. (A perfect place for a commercial break!)

During this pause, let’s remember, that as Matthew was writing his Gospel, that Paul’s letters were already circulating throughout the communities which were centering their lives on Jesus. (Another lectionary reading for tonight would come from Romans 11 – Paul’s discussion about the “in grafting” of the Gentiles. The sermon title comes from this passage – in light of the actions of God, “How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!) Paul’s letters are already brimming with invitation to the people of the nations. (the word “gentile” rooted in the Latin for nations –*gens*) The earliest followers of Jesus are discovering more than they ever imagined possible. The promises of God really are for all peoples...Jesus’ response to this woman is crucial...it’s a moment that will change everything... again...break all the rules...again.

By this time the woman is upon them, kneeling before Jesus.

“Unsearchable Judgments, Inscrutable Ways”

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship

August 17, 2008

The very first words of God’s dream again pour over us..., from long ago, a people have been called forth for the blessing of the nations... a particular people fathered by Abraham, mothered by Sarah; a people invited into relationship with God; into a very special responsibility. From the people of Abraham and Sarah would come – into the ordinary lives of *all people* – a new hope, a new promise, a way of being which offers freedom from the fears, frustrations and finitude of human existence.

But what an undertaking! As I mentioned earlier, to be discovering what it means *to be a people* and all the while *being at risk to forget the very purpose for being that people!*

The woman kneels before Jesus and he says to her and to the dismayed disciples, “this isn’t right...this breaks the rules...” Yet, Jesus goes on to say, “Woman, great is your faith, let it be done for you as you wish!” By his actions, Jesus redefines himself to the disciples...to the early hearers of the gospel message, to us tonight.

“Yes,” she acknowledges, it does break societal rules, religious rules, but here I am. Her request to be included in the family of God jars all sensibilities. It’s one thing to say philosophically “all are welcome” it’s quite another to experience welcome’s challenge – in flesh and blood! The Hebrew Bible records – as a mirror for our own experience – the reality of our ancestral kindred. The promise of God’s blessing remained even though they often erred in their ways and fell short in their responses to one another and the stranger.

The New Testament continues in a similar rhythm. The promise of God’s blessing to the nations continues in both philosophical and experiential ways. People are drawn to the irresistible message, the irresistible hope, the irresistible love, the incredible invitation found in the life and person of Jesus. Yes...this is the message...this is the Good News, (of great joy for all the people ) but the tension and challenge remain. We hear tell of a *particular woman* who comes out to meet Jesus. In spite of God’s promises, she is perceived as “something other.” She is held at arms length. Won’t she just go away?

Throughout the biblical accounts – from one Testament into another, this theme never fades. Throughout the entire Bible – from one Testament into the next, again and again – ordinary, commonplace encounters bear witness to the difficulty and challenge of “fleshing out,” of “living out,” of “putting into practice” God’s dream for creation.

Isn’t that the challenge of the church today? How many times do we as the church say one thing and practice another? Often in our church life we are challenged to embrace our God-given gifts. Next, we are encouraged to offer these gifts to the church. Yet, the very strangest and most painful season of my life was at the time I was discerning what seemed to be a call to a pastoral ministry. I sensed God’s gifts. I longed to share them

“Unsearchable Judgments, Inscrutable Ways”

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship

August 17, 2008

with the community. But I was disqualified. I was deemed ineligible because I was (and am) a woman. Alongside of the two young men at that time also sensing leadings toward ministry, I felt helpless. What could I do to be as acceptable as they? Yes, this was a painful time, yet one that has given me courage to speak on behalf of other “disqualified persons.”

Brothers and sisters, we know today that there are persons “coming out” of the reality of their daily existence, drawing near to the body of Christ, seeking acceptance and healing – for themselves, for their families. They recognize that the body of Christ is the place for healing, for hope. Yet, in spite of their desire for welcome – they find themselves rejected simply because of who and what they are. What gifts and blessings for all peoples do we reject and stifle because we are afraid to break the rules by welcoming them? Can we be a risk-taking people, a compassionate people- the body of Christ – **and** embrace God’s vision for all people? Brothers and sisters, can we be a people open to our own need for healing? I believe in this text that Jesus sought not so much to heal the Canaanite woman’s daughter as he may have “sought to heal those suffering from an impoverished understanding of God by lurching them toward new ideas and new life.” Colleen Carpenter Cullinan, *Redeeming the Story* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 135.

In Matthew 10:6, Jesus is noted to have said to the disciples. “Go *nowhere* among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Yet, in tonight’s text – we find Jesus and his disciples headed to Phoenicia. We have a pivotal moment in the encounter between the foreign woman and Jesus. What will happen next? In Jesus’ welcome of the Canaanite woman, he throws open the doors to all peoples of the world...For here, Jesus says, “Go therefore and be the Good News for *all nations...*” AMEN