

*A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas J. Brown, on Sunday, 14 August 2011, Proper 15 in lectionary year A, based upon Matthew 15.*

I don't know what caused your journey to walk through the doors of the Epiphany this morning. Perhaps it was to savor the beauty of this space, to experience sacred music, or to placate a friend or spouse or parent. Maybe it was simply a matter of habit, or maybe to hear a word that would help on your journey to make a connection with faith and scripture, and say, the global economy, Syria, London, failed political structures, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, or your own life. Maybe you're like me...you realize that we need friends, community...and spiritual practice to help us make sense of life.

Once upon a time, in 1965 to be exact, there was a person who knew something about spiritual practice, and of the truth of Jesus's witness to justice and mercy. He was Jonathan Myrick Daniels, and if it weren't for the fact that our Sunday celebration trumps our celebrations of our saints, we would honor this local saint and martyr. Jonathan grew up in Keene, New Hampshire, and was preparing for the priesthood at Episcopal Divinity School. Oh how I wish the Associate Rector were here this morning because Roger and Jonathan were classmates. In 1991 the Episcopal Church added Jonathan to our calendar of saints. Here's why:

Along with many other young people Jonathan spent much of 1965 in the deep south, helping African Americans gain their rightful access to the voting booths, in the face of local authorities who barred them. The setting was mid-August in Selma, Alabama. Jonathan, along with other so-called freedom riders, had been living and eating and working along side black families for several months. But things were hot. A group of the outside agitators--that's what the locals called the freedom riders--including Jonathan, were standing outside of a store's payphone, meeting with local African Americans and encouraging them to stand firm. A local man took out a gun. Instinctively Jonathan pushed a little girl out of the way, saving her, and leaving himself in the path of that single blast--killing him. Earlier that day Jonathan wrote a letter to his parents, who were against his decision to go to Selma, but who in later years took great comfort in these words:

“Among other things, Mom and Dad, I hope you will understand that the doctrine of the creeds, and the enacted faith of the sacraments are the essential preconditions of this whole experience. This is the faith with has brought me to Selma, and it's grown. I am beginning to know in my bones and sinews that I have been truly baptized into the Lord's death and resurrection, with them, the black men and the white men, with all life, in him whose Name is above all the names that the races and nations shout . . . we are indelibly and unspeakably one.”

Now turn with me to this morning's gospel text.

I don't know how it is for you, but I tell you with every fiber of truth inside of me that I love being a disciple of Jesus Christ, God's very own child. I love it for many reasons, but today I claim it boldly because I'm a disciple of one who had the capacity to change his mind and transform his heart.

We have to consider the story carefully. Jesus is confronted by an outside agitator. She's not a freedom rider. She's a Canaanite woman asking for help. Jesus response is utterly lacking in compassion and respect, there's no denying this. Still, a few things need to be stated, not to let Jesus off the hook, but to be clear. First, she was outside the circle of Judaism; she would have been suspected of worshipping false gods. Second, she was a woman, simply female. In ancient Israel, and in parts of the world today, the place of women was subjugated, and usually silenced. Two strikes: she's Canaanite and she's female. The third strike--still true even in parts of our own society, maybe in your own life--is that when she speaks she's considered pushy, or uppity. It's okay for a man to speak out to challenge, but not for a woman. Let's not clean up the story by saying that Jesus was testing his disciples, or that he was distracted. The fact is that our Lord was human, and his humanity becomes clear when he reacts with culturally approved thoughtlessness. But she herself

persists. "Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table," Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith."

Suddenly we see love transcend all the barriers. And we see with Jesus's eyes that she's something more than a Canaanite, more than a woman, more than a courageous outspoken voice asking for help, we see that she's a mother, as did Jesus. A mother, asking the Messiah Man to help her child. Love changes Jesus' mind and heart.

Jesus was always clear that he was called to lead a new Israel, but I think this story reveals to us a Savior whose horizons were widened, whose heart was opened yet more. He came to believe something new with the help of this woman.

We can too.

All of us draw circles that exclude others. Some among us aren't so sure that growing our church with more people is such a good idea. What if we don't know everybody? Among other things, today's gospel underscores the fact that there's always room to grow, and to change. The disciples are eager to draw a small circle around Jesus. When we regard each person as beloved kin the circle gets wider, not smaller--this is the testimony we have from Jesus and the Canaanite woman. He listens, changes his heart and mind.

Jonathan Daniels was an outside agitator who came to see, through faith in Christ, that all people are indelibly and unspeakably one...that's what he wrote to his mother and dad the day he died. The Canaanite woman was an outside agitator who came to see that she had a place at the table. Jesus was an outside agitator who changed his mind, and invites us to do likewise.

We're all outside agitators with gifts to give, and desires to fulfill. That's why we're here. Some of us desire healing--for ourselves or for others. We have a sacramental rite for that. Others among us--probably most--have come for solace and strength, and to make meaning. We have a sacramental rite for that--Christ's very own self poured out at this Altar, compelling us more and more to change and to grow, to transform the crumbs of our lives into generous loaves of love and grace.