

Doing What it Takes

The Episcopal Church of the Resurrection

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At this point I can barely keep up with my email much less texting, so Tweeting is not something I have yet to taken on. But here is an interesting tidbit I learned this past tumultuous week. This particular tweet (which had to be divided into 3 parts) originally written by Nelson Mandela in his autobiography, "Long Walk to Freedom" now has the honor of being *the one tweet* tweeted more times than any other tweet in human history.

"No one is born hating another person because of the color of their skin or his background or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

Remember the song in South Pacific?

You've got to be taught to be afraid

Of people whose eyes are oddly made.

It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear.

You've got to be carefully taught.

Jesus' whole life was a long walk to freedom, freedom from the braided strands of prejudice and fear.

Today we hear the unusual story of one of the actual times Jesus was challenged to love outside of his own learned prejudices.

It's an unusual, even astonishing story. Even though Luke's gospel assures us that Jesus grew in wisdom and grace, just like any other human being, we are not used to the idea that even God's beloved son had to be taught how to love. We forget that *to grow is to change, and to grow perfect is to change often.*

Jesus and his disciples were in the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon, where prudent Israelites do not walk alone. Racial stereotypes and bigotry informed all encounters between Israelites and Canaanites. The disciples – and as we shall see-- apparently even Jesus shared those prejudices.

Then one of *them*, a resident of this alien territory, shouts at Jesus. These are not the expected shouts of bigotry that characterize the relationship of mutual disdain. Instead, this is the earnest plea of a mother.

First, Jesus is silent in response to her cries.

He refuses even to acknowledge her. The disciples complain that she is being a pain and ask him to shew her away. At last Jesus turns to the woman and says something that has disturbed Christians for more than 2,000 years. He says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." But the woman does not let up.

So Jesus gets insulting: "It's not fair to take the children's bread" – the bread belonging to the Israelites – "and give it to the dogs" – non-Israelites like her. Not letting go of the bone, she says, "Okay, I am a dog. But even the dogs eat the crumbs those messy children get all over the floor!"

With that Jesus recognizes that she is a match for him, and he not only gives her what she wants, but he himself is transformed in the giving. He does not push her away. He listens to her, and finally sees in her something he did not see before.

So, let's notice this great faith that Jesus notices, and how it changes throughout the story. This part of the sermon I'm largely taking from John Shea, in his excellent book, "On Earth as it is in Heaven." (2004, Order of St. Benedict, Collegville, 255,266)

The woman is noisy and assertive. Then she is pleading and compliant. Finally she turns clever and confronting. Through all these changes she is still consistent. Her consistency does not lie in her attitudes and behaviors. Her consistency is her *mission*.

She has a demon-afflicted child, and if this Jewish Messiah can help, he is darned well going to, if she has anything to say about it. Little things – such as ethnic diversity and hatred—will not stand in her way.

We often think of faith as belief in God. However, this is not the great faith of the Canaanite woman. Her faith is that she is a tiger.

Her daughter needs healing, and she is the single-minded servant of that possibility. Her faith reminds me of another mother I heard of telling her son about her commitment to ridding him of the particular demon that had taken up residence in his attitudes

I want you to know I am never going to stop. You think you can sulk and avoid me, and I will go away. I am never going away. I want you to know that. And you can never run far enough to get away from me. This stuff is going to change.

If you heard her voice, the tone and timbre, you would know that you had encountered an absolute, an unshakeable presence in a world off swaying needs.”

50 years ago Christians, Jews, agnostics, black and white, and every shade in between brought their fears to God each in their own way gave them over to him, and trusted him to deliver us from the slavery of racism and prejudice as they marched to. Washington D.C. Those who took part in that march did their part towards making this a land of the free and a home of the brave. Perhaps some of you here were a part of that number.

In recent months some sad and angry people want to take us all back to being slaves of our fears and our prejudices. So now it is our turn again.

Faith in God's love, power and mercy can expose fear for the destructive force that it is.

True faith mimics the power and energy of a woman pleading for her child, a nameless Canaanite who will not be ignored. It has no room for prejudice. It is flexible and creative. It doesn't back down.

Faith is power. Engage it and use it. After all, to grow is to change, and to grow perfect is to change often.