

WHO IS OUR TEACHER? (MT 15:21-28)
Sermon given by the Rev. Corinne Hodges,
Sunday, August 17, 2008, St. John of the Cross

The sermon was preached without notes. The following is the preacher's reflection on the gospel, done in preparation for Sunday's sermon.

This past week I have had the privilege of having several conversations with children from our parish. Being that the academic year has started or is just about to start, school has been the main topic...that is school and teachers. It's not surprising that teachers are an important factor as to whether or not a child looks forward to school. One of the first questions is always, "Who is your teacher?" And the child's enthusiasm for school is often based on who that person is and his/her reputation.

There is no doubt that teachers play an important role in all of our lives. But I think we all would agree that teachers come in all shapes and sizes. Some of our teachers are the traditional ones, others are not. Our teachers might include our parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, coaches, even co-workers. Sometimes the biggest teachers are those whose names we do not even know. Sometimes we learn lessons from very unlikely teachers.

Several years ago, my husband Mike and I were late for a concert at an outdoor concert arena, just a couple blocks from our home in the Chicagoland area. We left home a little late that night so we made our way quickly. As we approached the railroad tracks right in front of the entrance, we saw all the other people hurridly making their way. But there was one man facing the opposite direction of everyone else. He was approaching people and trying to talk to them, but they either walked right past or waved him away. I could see from his face that he was quite distressed; nonetheless, no one paid him any attention.

As this man approached me, I found I had to stop and listen. He had a note in his hand with a time and location written on it. As we tried to listen to his broken English, we were able to piece together this story. The man was late for a job interview and had gotten off at the wrong train station. Now our town has four train

stations so it is an easy mistake to make, but this man was very far from his destination. He had no idea where he was nor how to get to where he needed to be, plus his communication skills were quite limited. Mike and I looked at each other and we knew what we had to do. We walked the man over to the train stop, showed him the map and schedule and pointed on his watch when the next train would be coming. We took him to the platform where he could catch the train that would be arriving shortly and set him on his way. When Mike and I turned toward the gate of the music center, we did not say a word at first. We found ourselves asking how many times we had ignored people in need. Caught up in our own lives, how often had we tuned out their cries for help? We had learned a lot from this persistent, desperate stranger. The man had had faith that eventually someone would help him out. We just happened to be the lucky ones that day.

The Canaanite woman in our gospel lesson today is yet another nameless, relentless stranger. Just like the man on the tracks, the woman does not take no for an answer. She is a living testimony to the saying that persistence pays off. We imagine that she is loud as she shouts to Jesus to have pity on her. She is irritating and perhaps embarrassing as the disciples complain about her. (She bothers them and they want Jesus to make her stop.) She falls on her knees right in front of Jesus, begging, “Lord, help me,” until finally he responds.

To be honest, I find Jesus’ responses in this story surprising, disappointing and even maddening. I don’t like that after the woman’s first cry to him he seems to ignore her. I am disappointed that his reaction to the disciples is to say that he is only there to help some people and not others. And when Jesus calls the woman a dog to her face, an insulting term for people on the lower end of the receiving line, I get a little angry. How could Jesus treat someone who is in such need this way? Someone who has called him Lord, Son of David, a title reserved for the Messiah, proving she is a believer? How could Jesus turn his back on the woman and her daughter?

In almost every other gospel story, Jesus is the teacher, the rabbi. But here in this reading, it’s the Canaanite woman who seems to teach Jesus and the disciples.

Now she's not your typical teacher...she's not well-educated or high up on the socio-economic ladder. She is not well-respected or even valued in society. She is an outsider in two ways...she's a woman and a Gentile.

So the question remains why did Jesus do what he did? Why did he ignore, try to avoid and even insult the woman? Several theories could be: a) he did not hear her the first time she called to him, although that seems unlikely; b) he wanted to be sure her faith was sincere; c) he wanted the disciples to witness her unyielding faith as a clear sign that Jesus' ministry was about to take a new direction. The "lost sheep" were about to include not only Jews who believed, but Gentile believers as well.

For me the bottom line to this story is twofold. First, we all have been in the shoes of the Canaanite woman to a certain degree. If we have not experienced it already, one day we may find ourselves desperate and pleading to God for help. The woman reminds us to be tenacious, to hang in there, to keep praying and eventually our prayers will pay off. Secondly, we must remember more than Jesus' first reactions to the woman; we must remember his last. He praised her for her great faith and she becomes an example for us all. God surrounds us with teachers throughout our lives—some we expect, others we do not. Be open to learning from everyone! God can use anyone to be our teacher.