**20th of August**

**Reflection**

This passage, yet another fascinating tale from Matthew, could point us in all sorts of directions, but today I’d like to let it push us toward listening, and what this bold woman can teach us about it.

The first thing to know for background is that the woman we meet is considered an enemy of the Israelites- she is a Canaanite, the Canaanites being a race of people the Israelites took the land of earlier in their story. There exists between them much enmity and a history of bloody discord. So that’s the bare bones; Jesus, a Jew, meets a woman from Canaan and we see how they interact.

And we see Jesus react very much as a person of that time and of his culture might be expected to, as much as it may pain us.

Jesus is silent, dismissive and outright rude to this person. So immediately we’ve stumbled upon a couple of questions: chief among them can Jesus be wrong, and also, can Jesus be racist. This latter question prompted by the slur “dog” which in this context was again not out of the ordinary, but is for sure a racial slur directed at this woman.

We’re reminded through this story that though we believe Jesus to be the incarnate form of the God we love, that He is also very much a human man, and this places him in a context. This is offered not to explain away the abuse here, but to perhaps help us confront it. At this point in his story, Jesus is a Jew, and he understood himself to be very much a servant to the people of Israel, sent by God to that house, to heal and to love and to guide them. He, it seems, does not see himself as beholden to just any old person who accosts him in the street. He states his position, unkindly, after ignoring her to begin with, and now we switch our attention to this remarkable woman.

In another lifetime I might write a thesis about what we can learn as women in the world about how to ask for, no- to demand- what we need from this woman. She, a Canaanite woman, finds this man whose skill and power and messianic identity she has heard rumours of all over the countryside, who might well be her last hope of healing for her beloved daughter. And so she skips straight past a quiet “ahem, excuse me sir” or a murmured “if I could please just have a moment of your time” and jumps right down in the middle of getting attention as loudly as possible. She yells at him.

And the infuriating part is that Jesus acts like he can’t hear her and it is the disciples who act, if only to push Jesus to send her away so her shouting doesn’t bother them anymore.

And the interaction, as we’ve discussed, doesn’t get much better, not for a little while anyway.

He tells her what he thinks is the truth- I’m not here for you.

And this time, she kneels before him, and she is begging.

Please Lord, help me. Kyrie eleison.

And here it gets ugly because instead of a compassionate response to a woman pleading for help Jesus says what can only be described as something quite bigoted.

My food is too good for the dogs, essentially.

And still-shockingly- the woman doesn’t give up. This time, having tried volume and direct pleading, she beats him at his own game. Fine. I’m a dog.

I may be a dog, but even dogs get scraps, she says. She doesn’t argue with his main point. Fine. You might not be here for me, but I believe in the mercy you can show me.

So let’s pause here and let what has happened wash over us a little. Not only is she still there, not only has she not been driven away by Jesus’ rudeness, or the disciple’s dismissal, she still believes that this man who has seen her for a moment only through the eyes of the his time and place and the coloured history of their two peoples, is the man who can heal her daughter. He is still the one for the job. He is still the messiah.

And it is this that changes the son of God’s mind. Jesus sees her unwavering belief in him, and her daughter is healed.

I don’t know about you but I am left a little stunned by that whole scene and certainly have a few questions,.

It seems as if what was rewarded wasn’t the kind of faith that is cultivated by weekly attendance at church, or by being a good and well behaved person, but the knowledge that Jesus was somehow god and man. I think at least in part, what she had faith in was his humanity.

And this faith changed her life, and her daughter’s, and potentially that of Jesus.

We as a nation are in the midst of an historic time. No I’m not talking about the Matilda’s in the world cup, though that is very exciting and the most interested I’ve been in sport for a very long time. I’m talking about upcoming referendum for the voice to parliament.

I might be literally preaching to the choir here but I think we would be remiss if when faced with this story about listening, about hearing, about mercy and humanity, if we didn’t ask ourselves who we are listening to. What are we giving our attention?

(play video)

So what can we learn from a woman who has yelled for attention, pleaded for help, has met the person who can help her where he is and not backed down?

What can we learn from people in the oldest surviving culture in the world, who dwelt here peacefully for generations until white men came and brought with them genocide, forced removal from their homes, the destruction of language and culture, the stealing of babies and the rape of women, what can we learn from those who survive still and are asking for mercy, asking us to listen in the simplest of terms? I’d say plenty.

I don’t want to push this illustration too far, because we don’t automatically want to always put ourselves in the place of Jesus or his disciples, even when they are behaving badly. We are not Jesus.

But we do or at least I certainly do, relate to the ease of only listening to or giving my attention to things or people to which I am comfortable doing so. I can be distracted. It is easy to ignore things that are outside the scope of our experience or which are perhaps too difficult, too painful, too big to want to give our notice to.

But here in this story we are reminded of what a gracious gift is given by those who give us the opportunity to listen. Who keep asking, who keep wanting to believe in our shared humanity. We are even reminded that those we consider enemies, those who feel perfectly justified in ignoring, those we wouldn’t want to give the time of day, might be able to teach us something. I don’t know about you but that little notion makes me a little uncomfortable.

We are reminded of what we can learn when we change our minds, what we can learn from those who are willing to challenge us and our worldview.

Today I’d like to ask you who you are listening to. Or, if there are times you feel you aren’t heard, and if the pain of that has moved you to further action or to silence.

What is it that we are lending our voices to?

What is it that we are giving our attention to?

To who, are we listening, and can we pray to seek out the still small voice of our creator, even when we know we don’t want to hear.

(silence)

***A prayer from Safina Stewart.***

God of wondrous possibility

Take my story and my life

Give me courage to stand for justice

God of dreaming and mystery

Forgive my blind complaining

Give me vision to walk remembering your history

God of truth and love

Take my bruised hands and feet

Give me strength and grace to stand for truth

God of safety and singing

Take my mouth and my voice

Give me words to inspire and encourage

God of knowledge and creativity

Take my whole being

Help me stretch, broaden and deepen

God of goodness and hope

Take my connections and influence

And help me stand for Voice and Justice

Amen