

**Proper 15A – August 17, 2014**  
**Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

Our eldest daughter Frances has been a mother for just over four years and her second child was born just a few months ago—and she’s doing a great job. As Frances grew up, my wife Megan and I more or less grew up with her. Because she was the first-born of our three children, Megan and I learned how to parent Frances in real time—or after the fact—as she was growing up. There’s nothing like having a child to let us realize that we are all a work in progress! Frances showed a distinct and strong personality from early on, putting us to the test as parents from the “get go.” She knew what she wanted and found a thousand ways to whine, cajole, negotiate, and otherwise wear us down. I’ve always said she would have made a powerful and persuasive attorney (instead, she has found her own calling as a teacher as well as a mother). From early on, I tended to be a bit of a softie and would capitulate sooner than her mother. Megan, on the other hand would often say NO as a first response to many of her requests or demands. That would make Frances all the more persistent in her arguments to get her mom to change her mind. That led, at times, to some rather unpleasant encounters, especially in those teenage years. Sometimes the “no” would remain “no” (such as “no body piercing and no tattoos”); other times, sometimes sooner—sometimes later, Megan would relent, and they would get to “yes.” This brings to mind our gospel today.

Today’s gospel reading shares a story of Jesus’ “no” in an unpleasant encounter turning into a “yes.” We see a discouraged, wearied, angry—even rude—Jesus, at his most human, most like us—a work in progress. Jesus had just crossed into what is now southern Lebanon, discouraged, having just come from Galilee where his own people had taken offense at his teaching and his actions, and had doubted his authority. Up to this point Jesus had believed that he was “sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel,” that is, to his own people; but a number of people did not respond positively to him. Most did not acknowledge or were nonplussed at the possibility of Jesus being the Messiah of God. He was not only discouraged but was also weary from many others who clamored after him for a cure, a healing. So Jesus enters foreign territory, at the frayed end of his rope, dismayed, burnt out, and cranky!

What we then witness is a scene of a somewhat embarrassing revelation about this humanness of Jesus. Through his encounter with a foreign woman, a Gentile, a non-Jew, Jesus’ self-understanding and mission are tested, as is our image of him. In this gospel, the woman is labeled a Canaanite, one of the ancient enemies of the Israelites, while the same story in Mark’s gospel more politely calls her “of Syrophenecian origin” (Mark 7:26).<sup>i</sup> She immediately violates social taboos, crosses several lines, as she shouts for healing for her daughter and calls Jesus, “Lord, Son of David,” a title reserved for the Messiah. When she, a foreigner, calls him this, she names something in him that many of his own people, and his own disciples, did not recognize. Because Jesus had seen his mission extending just to his own people, this woman’s calling him “Messiah” may have seemed more like a mean trick of fate to him—hearing what he most wanted to hear, spoken by someone he least wanted to hear it from. That was combined with his

exhaustion from being asked to do so much for everyone all the time. So he's fed up, and after giving her the silent treatment for a bit, he collaborates with his disciples' inhospitable comment by adding his own protest that his mission was to his own kind—"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she persists, pleading "Lord, help me." And if you think his next reply was harsh, it was! Jesus' reply led a former colleague of mine in Manhattan to say, "Who wants a savior that acts like a New York waiter?"—you know, [the guy who says] "So, whadya want? That's not my table!"<sup>ii</sup> "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," was what Jesus actually said. Now let's not get hung up with Jesus not getting everything just right. After all, this is a story about Jesus' *changing*, and about *how* he changed. Recall in Luke's gospel, just after the scene of the 12-year old Jesus in the Temple, where it states, "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in divine and human favor" (Luke 2:52). What does that mean except that Jesus was human as well as divine and was continually growing? Let's be real—in our Scriptures we don't hear about Jesus after the age of twelve, until he is fully adult, at thirty or so—just about as long a time as most people, it seems, experience their adolescence! In fact, at the age of twelve, we saw that he was already getting a bit testy.<sup>iii</sup> As Anne Lamott put it,

"Even the second person of the Trinity had to learn by doing, by failing, by feeling, by being amazed. God sent Jesus to join the human experience, which means to make a lot of mistakes. Jesus didn't arrive here knowing how to walk. He had fingers and toes, confusion, sexual feelings, crazy human internal processes. He had the same prejudices as the rest of his tribe: he had to learn that the Canaanite woman was a person. He had to suffer the hardships and tedium and setbacks of being a regular person. If he hadn't, the Incarnation would mean nothing."<sup>iv</sup>

Just as we recognize the importance of growth and change as essential parts of our human development, so also we need to see that the humanity of Jesus entailed the possibility of his growing and learning. This is just what we see happen here as Jesus comes to see his call in a new way. Martin Luther commented on this encounter, "All Jesus' answers sound like *no*, yet are *not no* but swing in suspense. There is more in them than *no*. *Yes* is in them secretly and deeply." It's important to notice that Jesus lets someone else's call clash with his own. The Bible is full of stories with the common theme of God's making a habit of including *outsiders* in God's mission, thus opening up *insiders* to that fact—even Jesus. Jesus stays open enough to face into, rather than avoid, this clash of calls. He didn't follow the advice of his disciples to send the woman away. As I said, he had seemed clear about his understanding of his call to his own people, but when approached by the call of this foreign woman in need who calls him "Lord, Son of David," something other than anger and frustration and weariness was also working in him. He allowed his limited human perception of his divine mission to be challenged. He listened to the voice of someone seemingly outside the scope of his mission, and waited long enough to hear a new voice from God speaking through the unlikeliest of voices—this non-Jewish, foreign woman who expressed herself with courageous persistence, to the point of being annoying. In this encounter Jesus leaned in the direction of God's grace. We don't know just what went on in Jesus' head and heart, but the Gospel shows him listening to her—not running away, not sending her away as the disciples advise. Even in

the midst of his own rude outburst, he still listened to her. And, thank God, this woman gave as good as she got—with great grit and wit of her own: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” With a kind of verbal aikido, she took his negative force, absorbed it, allowed it to pass by, and then transformed it.

Barbara Brown Taylor likens this to Jesus’ drawing a line—“no one crosses this line”—and the woman just erases it each time. Or like the children’s game of looking into each other’s eyes, each trying to make the other blink first. Well, Jesus blinks—he has a change of heart not only about her but about his understanding of his call and purpose, as we hear him say, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”<sup>v</sup> The Son of God was not too locked in or too proud to change his mind. So, “yes” resides in this story of Jesus, secretly and deeply. That’s how we get to yes in this story. And God wants nothing less of us. You and I are given the privilege of discovering that secret and deep place in ourselves, as we become more mindful of the call we have each received, mindful of the voices to which we listen, mindful of the opportunities we are given to go in the direction of grace and mercy and love. So where do we put ourselves to allow different voices to challenge us? And how are we called to grow and change and move in the direction of God’s grace and mercy, not just in our personal lives, but as the church in the public arena? The Church—the Body of Christ—has had to change over the centuries as it has listened to the voices of pain and the real needs of the world. Whether it was realizing the need to question the rule of monarchs in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; or to begin the abolition of slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; or to then affirm the rights and role of women in church and society; then to acknowledge divorce; and then to respect the dignity of persons with different sexual orientations; and to care for the planet—in each generation the Church has been called to grow in faith in *new* ways, and to follow the living Christ where he leads, crossing the lines of old boundaries, reaching across to those who have been left out. We and our church continue on as works in progress. That requires that we face up to the challenge to change from more literalist ways of reading Scripture and from more narrowly defined understandings of God, and of the scope of our call. For it was Jesus himself, we learn in this passage today, who learned that God’s purposes for him were bigger than he imagined, and that he himself was called to step across new territory and listen to new voices, try new ways of thinking, and even change his mind, and his mission.<sup>vi</sup>

In some ways, this gospel passage is a tough story to handle. But as the writer Kathleen Norris observed: “One often hears people say ‘I just can’t handle it,’ when they reject a biblical image of God. I find the choice of words revealing. If we seek a God we can handle, that will be exactly what we get. A God we can manipulate, suspiciously like ourselves, the wideness of whose mercy we’ve cut down to size. But there’s actually something marvelously hopeful about a God who risks to be among us, to grow with us in grace.”<sup>vii</sup>

This gospel story ends with both healing and a new vision, which is what the living Jesus is really about. That’s the kind of teacher we can learn from, and the kind of Savior we need, and the kind of Lord we can follow—the one who *grows with us* in grace.

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<sup>i</sup> See Conversion of St. Paul – January 25, and Propers 18B and 19C (#2)

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<sup>ii</sup> Jay Sidebotham, “Getting to Yes” (New York: St. Bartholomew’s Church, August 18, 2002)

<sup>iii</sup> See Luke 2:41-51 – see also Second Sunday of Christmas (#3) and St. Joseph – March 19.

<sup>iv</sup> Anne Lamott, Grace (Eventually) (New York: Riverhead Books/Penguin Group (USA), 2007), p. 129.

<sup>v</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, The Seeds of Heaven (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1990), pp. 39-45

<sup>vi</sup> ...so that by the end of Matthew’s gospel (29:19), we see clearly that Jesus’ mission extends to all nations.

<sup>vii</sup> Kathleen Norris, Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith (New York: Riverhead Books/Penguin Group (USA), 1998), p. 214.