

Ron Gilmer
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Year A
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Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that, hearing, we may also obey your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

CLASSES THAT SHOULD BE TAUGHT IN SEMINARY

MATTHEW 15:21-28

In the fall of 2006, the Board of Trustees of Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education gathered in Charlotte for a series of meetings. The stated purpose of one of the meetings was to listen, to listen to recent graduates speak on the subject of what should be taught in seminary. It was fun to participate. Plus, it was satisfying to note that the seminary's Board of Trustees was willing to question itself, was willing to change.

What classes should be taught that were not being taught? For me, the answer was simple: (1) interior decorating; and (2) mission (not mission in the abstract, but mission as it was experienced). One of the conflicts in the church that I was serving at the time was over the question of how to spend funds designated for interior decorating; another was related to justifying this spending when disaster relief and international mission efforts were expected to be self-funding. The Board of Trustees appreciated stories about how the deeply theological questions being asked about the color and thickness of curtains, for example, affected congregational life; and perhaps through the laughter, the Holy Spirit loosened up the group enough to hear suggestions about preparing its graduates for mission and service.

Sometimes I think that I a semester or two of Spanish would have served God's purposes for me better than a sequence of Greek or Hebrew has (at least thus far). Now that I am at UPC, I wish that the seminary that I attended offered courses in plumbing, heating and air conditioning or property

management. In every area of my life and in every parish that I have served, I know in my bones that I would have benefitted from a crash-course in exorcisms, because each and every one of us---and each and every institution that we serve---including the church, has its demons, demons that our faith demands be exorcised.

The question that the seminary asked me is one that I intend to visit and revisit, because it is helpful in understanding one's self and in understanding the institution that one serves. So helpful, in fact, that I decided to ask this question of every recent seminary graduate that I know. Isn't e-mail wonderful? I sent this question into cyberspace on Wednesday or Thursday, and answers were coming in by Thursday or Friday. Preliminary results of this unscientific survey suggest that recent graduates of at least three PC(USA) seminary campuses feel underprepared to preside at weddings and funerals (though, in most cases, they do know the difference between a wedding and a funeral). Church administration also is a cause of anxiety. What does the church budget process look like? What does one do when the work of the church feels at odds with its theology and mission?

All of us, you and I, are ministers. Ours is a priesthood of all believers. In fact, this is one of strongest arguments for the ordination of gay, lesbian, transgendered and bi-sexual Presbyterians of which I am aware; and while it would be marvelous to take credit for this idea, the argument belongs to PC(USA) Minister of Word and Sacrament and Candler School of Theology Professor Thomas Long. For Long, the question is not, "Who shall the church ordain?" But: "Since we are all ordained to ministry by virtue of our baptism, how shall we discern who is set apart for this particular form of service?" By collapsing the distinction between baptism and ordination, another Tower of Babel falls. All hierarchies in the church are socially constructed. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is barrier-crushing, giving life to us all.

In the story of the Canaanite woman's faith, Jesus exorcises demons: the woman's; her daughter's; Tyre and Sidon's. The Canaanite woman seems hysterical; and who would not be? Her daughter is "tormented by a demon;" and Jesus' initial response does nothing to alleviate her anxiety.

He ignores her first cry for help. He denies her second cry. Then only after she grovels---only after she worships him---does he recognize her faith and exorcise the demon that torments her, which, of course, is the demon that torments her daughter.

The Canaanite woman's daughter's demon is, as we say in systems theory, "the presenting problem." Her problem is the one that bubbles to the surface and demands immediate attention. The problems in this story, however, are plentiful; the demons are systemic. Jesus is Jewish, and he is traveling through the predominantly Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon. The Canaanite woman is both a Canaanite and a woman. She points out the religious and ethnic differences as soon as she cries out to Jesus by saying, "Lord, Son of David," and the woman's cry falls on deaf ears. The disciples, embarrassed by and for her, ask Jesus to send her away; and he answers (and it is unclear whether he answers the disciples or the woman) by saying, ever so mysteriously, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Translation: I am Jewish. She is Greek. What else is there to say?

Apparently, much more, the Canaanite woman comes and kneels before him, praying, ever so simply, and ever so profoundly, "Lord, help me." And what does Jesus Christ, the Lord of all compassion, do? He argues with her, pleading, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Fair? Who says life is fair? And why does Jesus call this woman a dog (the nuance in the Hebrew is that Jesus calls her a small yappy dog)? Remember there is a girl tormented by a demon somewhere in the background of this scene. By now, if I were this woman, I would be paralyzed by feelings of helplessness, and yet she perseveres, insisting, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." She accepts the hierarchy that has been socially constructed in hopes that Jesus will subvert it, and of course, he does, proclaiming, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter is healed instantly.

By this point in the story, the Canaanite woman has called Jesus "Lord" three times. He has recognized her faith, ethnicity and gender only once each; and once is enough, because, as soon as he

peels away the prejudices that have been socially constructed and wrapped around her, he is able to embrace her for who she is and to celebrate the faith that God has given to her. He intercedes for her inasmuch as she intercedes for her daughter. This Canaanite woman holds the distinction of being one of the few people in Scripture who persuades Jesus to do something that he is reluctant to do . She may be the only human being in Scripture who changes Jesus' mind (but I am reluctant to state that publicly without further investigation).

Faith, in this story, is defined in terms of one's willingness to eat crumbs. The Canaanite woman recognizes that she is incapable of exorcising her daughter's demon without help, and with this woman's help, Jesus comes to appreciate the fact that being the Messiah involves healing *all* people, even Canaanite women. By his willingness to heal her daughter, by his willingness to eat crumbs, we are able to feast on communion bread and wine, which for us signifies the body of Christ, broken for us, and the blood of Christ, shed for you and me.

Since God heals a Canaanite woman's daughter through a Jewish Messiah, there is hope for Christians and Muslims who are deeply divided. It is possible to pray for peace in the Middle East, in Russia and Georgia, in Sudan and Darfur and to trust God to answer prayers. In Jesus Christ, God exorcises demons: political; cultural and personal. No, the past cannot be changed. The lion and lamb may not lie down together tonight; but the Spirit of God is alive and well in the church and the world, and this Spirit grips us midst our pride and despair. This Spirit grips us so tightly, so lovingly, that it becomes impossible to differentiate between Jew and Greek, male and female. This Spirit also helps us to acquire a taste for crumbs (or crow if there is demon that needs exorcising this morning).

O taste and see that the Lord is good! Happy are those who find refuge in Jesus Christ our Saviour, "who," as it says in Philippians, "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of

death---even death on the cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to God's glory." To the God of all grace, who calls you to share God's eternal glory in union with Christ, be the power forever! Amen.