

Marquand Chapel
Tuesday, November 8, 2005

Faith of the Heart
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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable and pleasing unto you, O God, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

Her name is Mary. At the age of 93, she stands 5 feet 3 inches tall, but you wouldn't know it since she spends most of her time in a fetal position. Her hair is a shiny white. Her bright blue eyes punctuate her wrinkled face. Her toothless gums make her look more like a homeless person than a beloved mother of three.

I met Mary a few weeks ago at my hospice internship. I went to visit her at a local nursing home and came prepared with my usual items. I had my fact sheet that included her date of birth and diagnosis—which in this case was dementia. I had my prayer book, ready if she hailed from a liturgical denomination and preferred more traditional prayers. I carried a few poems in case she liked more secular meditations. And in the back of my mind, was my ever developing theology of suffering and death, which I was ready to employ if she asked questions like “Why do I suffer?” and “What happens when I die?”

So there I was with my books and poems, with my official hospice badge and my cheeks red from the autumn air, walking into Mary's room—a Christian worker armed with a toolbox of hope and comfort, ready to implement my fine divinity school education.

The problem was that Mary, like so many dementia patients, doesn't talk. She can't. Her larynx and tongue produce only garbled messages. In addition to her speaking difficulties, Mary also has trouble understanding words and processing thoughts.

Thirty seconds in that room showed me that my fine preparation was useless. In fact, *all* my training to *articulate* my faith, to *preach* the good news, to *speak* the truth in love, to *pray* with inclusive names for God, wasn't going to help since language wasn't an option.

No, there would be no *talking about* faith with Mary this day. Instead, my heart needed to take the lead. My head could only follow along.

Now maybe you have had a similar experience. When somehow everything you've been taught *about* a subject pales in comparison to living it. It seems to me that that's what's going on in our gospel message today.

Our text is certainly one of the more difficult ones we find in the New Testament. Our blessed Jesus is...to put it bluntly...acting like a real jerk. But I think if we look closely, this story has a lot to teach us about heads and hearts and what it means to be in relationship with God.

Our story begins with the line “Jesus left that place.” Well “that place” is the company of the Pharisees and scribes, who, as usual, had been grilling Jesus about his relationship to tradition and the law.

The Pharisees think they have all the answers. And in a way they do. After all, they are well-educated. They know their tradition’s history and laws. They can offer the authoritative interpretation, employ the proper hermeneutic, and craft the perfectly nuanced question.

Maybe you know people like this.

Folks who can spend hours in their heads, debating the theological underpinnings of their faith, but whose harsh lines, precise interpretations, and concern for “being right” seal off their very hearts.

So what does Jesus do after encountering these Pharisees?

He leaves, and heads out to the Gentile territory—away from the land of the very people to whom he was sent.

Pretty soon, a woman comes running toward him, robe flowing in the wind, terror in her eyes, a Canaanite of all people crying out the words of faith, “Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon.”

Imagine, if you will, this grief-stricken mother, so full of her own anguish and fear that she is willing to try anything to save her daughter’s life. Maybe you’ve experienced a loss like that...a loss that shakes the very foundation of your being, a loss that puts life into a whole new perspective.

This woman seeks out Jesus, and here’s where it gets sticky. Initially Jesus seems to ignore the woman’s pleas. The disciples clamor for him to send away this annoying lady; and Jesus replies by articulating his own mission to the lost sheep of Israel. Yet the woman remains *undeterred* and *hopeful*. She persists in her plea of faith, calling out again, “Lord, help me.”

Jesus answers her this time with a cryptic statement about children’s food being thrown to dogs. Scholars, as you know, take this to mean Jews and Gentiles, but this woman—this Gentile woman—is still undeterred. She replies again with the words of faith. “Yes, LORD, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

This dialogue, while troubling, is profound. The woman, with her grief in the front of her mind, concedes that Jesus is *right*—she *is* a dog. Not simply in a Gentile sense, but in the fact that she is utterly *helpless*, utterly *dependent*, and utterly *hungry* for mercy. For her, one crumb is more than enough.

This woman knows loss, not law. This woman knows pain, not perfection. Her faith is not based on some theological treatise about the inclusion of God’s kingdom. No, her faith is rooted deep in her heart, in her *grief* over an ill daughter, in her recognition that she is *powerless*

to do anything about it, in her *passion* and *compassion* for the life of another, in her *hope* for something more. Her faith takes root because her heart is open.

And so Jesus, seeing her desperation but also her deep trust, commends her great faith. And with barely a word, he heals her daughter.

Now we stand in this odd position here at Yale Divinity School, at once heirs to both the Pharisees and the Canaanite woman. For whether we admit it or not, we are the religious leaders of our day, well-trained in our history and traditions. Yet, at the same time, we are children of faith, crying out for wholeness and healing.

So what do we do with this paradox?

By no means do I want to stand up here, amid this community of the *intellectual* and the *faithful*, and say we don't need our minds. We all know that is poor stewardship of our gifts and the gospel. But I think this text does pose a genuine challenge for us:

In what do we *ground* our faith?

Is it in the knowledge of our religious laws, in our policies and procedures, in our theologies and exegesis, in our quest—a quest so prevalent here at YDS—to “get it right?”

Or do we ground our faith in the depths our hearts, where we *grieve* for the things we've lost, where we find those lurking *doubts*, where we store our *fears* and *hopes*, where we become radically *open* because know we cannot make it on our own?

And so there is Mary. The 93-year-old woman lying in a fetal position in her bed. And there is me, vibrant and healthy and standing there with my toolbox of comfort and hope. It turns out the prayer book does come in handy, not for the ministration of the sick or the litany of the dead, but because there is a big gold cross on the front of it. I hold it up for Mary to see. Her eyes get wide. Her lips make an “Oh.” And out of her blanket extends a gnarled but open hand.

I pull up a chair, and before I know it, I am no longer worried about offering a liturgical prayer, or a secular poem, or some nuanced theology. No, it's just Mary and me. Both broken, both lost, and both hoping that the God who created us will come and fill our hearts.

And so the question for us is this: When words fail, when theologies become obsolete, when fancy terms like eschatology and koinenia can no longer roll off our tongues, when all we have is our grief, our loss, and an ounce of hope—will that be enough?

The Canaanite woman seemed to think so. So did Mary. And so does Jesus. Amen.

Benediction: And now, brothers and sisters, may the God who created you with beautiful hearts and beautiful minds bless you and keep you, and may you go out into this world, rejoicing with hearts of faith and deeds of love. Amen.