Welcome

It is rally Sunday, and there is nothing like kicking off the church year with what is perhaps one of the more difficult and challenging stories about Jesus. Now we could create excuses for Jesus as for why he called this woman a dog, after all he had just been traveling and was tired, he was trying to get away, he didn’t want to deal with anyone and here he was interrupted. Theologians have after all been making excuses for Jesus, saying that he was just testing this poor woman, but really I can’t think of any acceptable excuse. Jesus calls this woman a dog. Here is this woman begging for help for her child, her daughter, and Jesus refuses, using the analogy of children and dogs and the need to provide for children, yet he is doing this in order to refuse to help a tormented child.

Over the coming year we are focusing on developing a passionate spirituality, and one of the core things we are going to encourage is daily devotions, which involves daily reading scriptures. So perhaps it is good that we begin with what we do with difficult in scriptures. Scripture functions in several different ways, and one of the core ways that scripture functions is to challenge us, to break open our assumptions and understanding, to shatter our idols, and to shatter our world view when it blinds us to God. And this happens usually when scripture jars us and forces us to really work with it.

And this scripture begins quite jarring. After all it begins with Jesus seemingly getting it wrong. After all we only need to look at our reading from James, to see that making distinctions between people is understood as absolutely contrary to one of the core teaching of Christ, “You shall love your neighbour as your self” And yet this is precisely what Jesus seems to be doing.

The first idol that this begins to shatter her is our idol of how we understand perfection sin. For how can Jesus be perfect, with out sin, and get it wrong? You see how we often think of perfection, as a state where everything is always right and unchanging, is not only an impossible ideal for humans who much grow and develop, it is also not the scriptural understanding of perfection, rather it actually comes from Greek philosophy. In scripture perfection is actually about telos, or in other words the direction in which we are moving towards, and the ripening of what we were meant to become. Yet should Jesus not be fully ripe? Well it depends what Jesus’s full ripeness means. The theologian Schliermacher gave us an important insight, namely that Jesus’ full divinity was based on his perfect relationships and his perfect responding to the Father. What this means is that if you want to understand what Jesus is about, and what it means to be a Christian, then we need to see how Jesus responds and how he moves.

So what does Jesus do? First we need to realize where Jesus starts. In Jesus’ day, the Jewish religion set out very strict divisions between people and very different value was placed on a person depending on who they were. This woman and her child would have been in this system doubly discounted. First we are talking about a woman and her child at a time when women were treated as simply less then human, and a child even less so. On top of that they were gentiles, the very people that Jews were not even suppose to associate with.

From this we see the first way in which Jesus acts in a way that reveals when at means to be perfect. When his societal and religious laws would have instructed Jesus to not even talk to this woman, he dared to encounter and engages her.

What is even more striking is what happens, here is Jesus, the Son of God, who gives his response to her “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to dogs” You would think that that would be it. God just spoke c’est fini. But no, the woman responds, and instead of just saying that he was right, instead of defending his opinion, Jesus is not only open to what she says, but the second critical thing Jesus does is he changes his mind.

For me the depths of this passage begin to be seen when we place this in the context of broader Christian teaching, for we believe that God is present in creation, that God speaks through people. God is present, even in the despised. It makes me wonder if what we have in this story is a glimpse of God’s own relationship being spoken through people.

Finally Jesus responds. Jesus doesn’t just agree with her and continue on, but he heals her, and then in the very next story, right after this story where he calls this gentile woman a dog, Jesus is off traveling to the Greek, and thus gentile, cities of the Decapolis, in order to heal someone. Jesus after this encounter changes the very direction and audience of his ministry. This is no superficial response. Jesus’s encounter with this women opens Jesus’ ministry not just to this women, but to all gentiles, which includes most of us.

So what does this mean for us? First there is no question, despite our many failures, an unconditional welcome and refusal to treat people with distinctions, is a part of the core which defines the people of God and the church of God. We do this not because it is nice, but rather we do this following Jesus and beginning

1. By first of all realizing that we can get it wrong. After all if the Son of God can get caught up in his own society’s prejudices, none of us can assume that we are not in the same boat. For each of us there is someone, or some group of people we would prefer not to encounter . Who is it for you? The mentally ill? The homeless? Criminals? The wealthy? Which ethnic groups?

2. The next thing is that we are called, not just to say nice words, but to actively encounter and engage those people who are different from us. This is one of the reasons why we have the relationship that we do with Abundant life. For us to be follows of Christ we need to encounter each other and build relationships with those who are different then us.

3. And no building relationships with those who we tend to avoid is not easy. Arrogance, wanting things to be our way, wanting things to be convenient, wanting our ways of thinking to not be challenged, these are the ways of sin, in contrast the way of Christ was to be open, and to even be taught by those we would rather avoid. Why, well quite simply because we believe that God is present in those people. God speaks thought people, and not it is not in the form of always being nice. I always find it interesting that when people work with the poor there is the expectation that they will always be nice, always appreciative, or maybe even having some secrete wisdom. Lets face it, being poor is rotten, and tends to twist people, and yet it is in precisely in how this challenges us, to be open, to be loving, to be grace filled and humble, that God speaks.

4. And finally like Jesus this is not just about a nice exchange, but it is about our being open to having the very direction of our life and ministry changed, because this is how God’s Kingdom breaks into our life and our world.

I must also say that this is my hope and dream for this church, that we might truly be a place were the full diversity of God’s children can find a home.

This summer I was visiting with a friend who told me her visit to Glide Memorial. The first thing you need to know about his her experience of church. They were once deeply involved in the alliance church where they live. She led the choir, her husband had led the youth group. Then it came out that her husband had been struggling with alcohol, and very quickly, instead of embracing and supporting them, they pushed them out of their role and into the unseen margins. They were broken, and their church, because they didn’t measure up, broke them further. Then my friend was in San Fransisco, she had asked which church to go to have a San Francisco Church and she was told to go to Glide memorial. As she walked to the church she ran into a line up, a line consisting of probably every homeless, every down and outer in San Fransisco all lined up. And when she got into the church, the service was rocking with African Ameriancan worship, and then it came to the sermon time. They had a guess preacher. A white guy, she described as looking roughly like me when I am on holidays, got up. And this was his sermon, This is God’s church, and because it is God’s church blacks are welcome, (and half the church who was black cheered), The prostitutes are welcome (at which point a group of women, who were some of the local prostitutes, some with babies on their hips cheered” In this Church the gays are welcome (another group of men and women cheered), and picking up the cadence he continued, in this church the homeless are welcome, others cheered, and then he paused, and in this church gesturing to him-self, dressed in shots, sandals and a tacky hawawiian shirt, the strait white male is welcome and every body cheered. That was it, the whole sermon. There was no need to say anything more, because the Gospel was proclaimed in the very life, in the very presence of the people gathered, people who gathered as God’s people, welcomed without distinction. This is the church, living out what this woman had taught. You can imagine the impact it had on my friend who had been told the she and her family were not welcome.

This year we are focusing on developing Passionate Spirituality, we will focus on things like daily devotions, retreats and prayer. We will know we have succeeded, not though surveys, nor comments, we will know that we are living out a Passionate Spirituality when, we recognize that we can get it wrong, when we dare to encounter those different from us, when we let Speak to us, and allow those words to transform our life. Then when we live this, in the life of this congregation, when the people gathered here reflect the kingdom of God, filled with the wonderful diversity of humanity, gathered here, with out distinction, proclaiming the Gospel by the grace they live. Then we will have discovered what it is to live a truly passionate Spirituality.