



Prepare to Be Surprised
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:10-28
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (August 20, 2023)

Sometimes you just have to hit the reset button. When things don't go well, when you have made several thought-out and skillful interventions at solving a problem with hopeful expectations, and nothing seems to work, you just want to push the reset prior to unplugging a device altogether.

In today's gospel, Jesus needs to reset his mission vis-a-vis God's universal salvation plan. He is clear about his mission and up to this moment he is not aware that his understanding of his mission is culturally tainted. In fact, he is quick to clarify that, first and foremost, salvation is for all the lost sheep of the House of Israel. He has internalized the superiority complex of his people towards foreigners and affirms the traditional Jewish approach to salvation history: Jews first, Gentiles later (Isaiah 49:6; 57:7).

Jesus and his disciples are in foreign territory when a Canaanite woman starts shouting at him trying to grab his attention and ask for a miracle. Jesus at first ignores her but her cry grows all the louder. His disciples get annoyed at the scene she is making and probably also at Jesus for not stating his unwillingness to break this specific cultural norm openly. Their embarrassment and anxiety about the scene prompt them to demand to resolve the unpleasant public emotional display.

The Canaanite woman surprises Jesus with her persistent request and firm faith. Through her audacious yet humble approach, Jesus learns something about the expansiveness of God's love and the urgency of breaking cultural and religious boundaries for the purpose of opening God's grace even to outsiders and centuries old enemies. He knows that, eventually, God's grace will be extended to all, including to Canaanites. He encourages prayer for one's enemies (Matthew 5:44) and yet up to this point, he is very strict with his salvation timeline: Jews first.

His is a very ethnocentric approach. No matter how well intentioned one is and how much one wants to live in integrity with one's heart, still there are personal biases that get in the way and blind us to personal choices and behaviors that we regret once we become aware of them.

This has obviously happened to also Jesus who shows his human limitations. The "ethnic" bias with which he grew up is evident in the way he spoke about the Gentiles on several occasions up to this point in the gospel of Matthew (see 5:47; 6:7 6:32; 18:17). His cultural identity, no matter how critical Jesus can be towards his own tradition, is a roadblock to his compassion towards a foreigner. Initially, Jesus did not want his disciples anywhere near Gentiles (as well as Samaritans: see 10:5) until this conversation.

The woman's insistence and demonstration of faith throws him off and he is not too proud to acknowledge that he is wrong. He needs to push the reset button and get his theology straight. In

his acknowledgement, Jesus demonstrates in humility, vulnerability, and simplicity for all his disciples to see his willingness to reflect on his mistakes, reset the trajectory of his mission, and grow closer to his identity and vocation and, ultimately, to his God (see Mark 1:9-11 which is more direct than Matthew 3:17).

There is no formal apology, but Jesus exalts the Canaanite's faith: not only her trust in him is an example for all, but she is a blessing to Jesus in particular since her total trust in him affirms his identity. In fact, how do you feel when someone show unrestrained trust in you? Don't you feel seen, valued, appreciated, and encouraged to continue on the same path? Doesn't their respect build up your confidence and assure you of their undivided support?

The Canaanite woman's trust reveals her open-heartedness and receptivity as well as her intimacy and vulnerability. Her spiritual connection with Jesus allows him to become aware of his ethnic bias, to learn from his mistakes, and to change. Not only is the woman's daughter healed but Jesus will withdraw his ethnic limitations and send his disciples into all the world.

God is not only at work in the people of Jesus' immediate reach. God is not only at work in the people of our inner circle, in the ones we are familiar with, the ones we associate with, or only in those we love. God is not only at work in the people we limit ourselves to, beyond whom we do not attempt to go. God seems to call us to step out of the boundaries we set for ourselves out of prejudices, fear, or calculated economy. God is already out there, in the "beyond," at work constantly and faithfully for the purpose of creating beauty, love, healing, community.

God's mission goes on out there. Ready to join God?

Are there Canaanite women in the local community ready to surprise us if we are ready to listen and pay attention?

Let us pray for God's benevolence in showing us our personal biases and for sending people in our lives who affirms us on our journey. Let us pray for a curiosity and a boldness in faith that opens us to the riches of God's creative love already at work in God's world. Let us join God's mission to reach out and to build, to love and to heal, to reconcile and to embrace. Amen.