

August 14, 2011 – Encounter and identity, call and response
Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28 / Proper 15 / Year A

*May all I say, and all we receive, be in accord with your hopes
and intentions for us – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen*

First of all, thanks, Stephanie, for again inviting me to think out loud about today's gospel, and its relationship to a couple of other things connected with this particular date in the life of the church.

Second, be assured that it is totally coincidental that you get me up here the week after our deacon has departed for other duties. The preaching schedule for the summer was drawn up a month or more before the change in staff was even envisioned. I hope you know that I would certainly never ask to follow someone else's closing homily! So don't read anything into my being up here today beyond an invitation two months ago! Third, you might be amused that a long-time friend of mine reminded me a while back that – in his view – the perfect sermon is no more than eight minutes long! However, it was also another long-time friend who first shared with me Voltaire's admonition that "perfect is the enemy of good." You might want to know, then, that I'm working on "good" this morning, and not perfect. Or even perhaps "doubly perfect?!" Who am I? Who are you? I ask this question not in the context of the kind of self-introspection on career, relationships, self-fulfillment, etc., that some of us spent untold hours and a lot of money on during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. What I'm actually talking about is the question of how we know who we are at our core, as God knows us and hopes for us to recognize and manifest in the world.

This question of how we understand this identity was one of the two things – together with "encounter" – that immediately came to mind when I first looked at today's gospel a few weeks ago. I concede that "encounter" is probably a given in this instance, because this particular gospel – from my perspective – describes one of the most unusual and perplexing encounters with Christ in our whole lectionary.

Now having revisited this several times in the past couple of weeks, and having considered a few reflections on this text by others, it's still apparent that there are several ways to slice the meaning of this particular gospel. But I'm going to stick with the concepts of encounter and identity, but simplify this a bit to "call and response," especially because the other links to August 14th in the larger church, in this community, and in this parish definitely involve the recognition of an encounter with the identity God intends, and the response to and acceptance of that call.

So what about the "encounter" or "call" in today's gospel? Well, let me first check a perception: Do any of you share the impression that this passage from Matthew one of the more mystifying in scripture? Perplexing even? I thought several of you might agree with this. I mean, week after week, we see the pharisees chastising Jesus for associating with a whole host of people who fall below the line of acceptable company for upright, practicing Jews of the time. And they also spend quite a bit of time trying to trip Jesus up on the large and small points of the law. And Jesus, in turn, continually challenges the pharisees (1) to look beyond their narrow fixation with the law, and (2) to understand that the kingdom that has come and is coming is much more expansive and embracing and all-encompassing than they have understood or imagined. But then here, all of a sudden, Jesus himself responds to the plea of the Canaanite woman for mercy and healing for her daughter in a manner that, well, to my taste, sounds way too much like these same Pharisees.

In fact, in verse 7 (which we did not read today), he has just taken them on for challenging him on why his disciples break the tradition of the elders by failing to wash their hands before they eat. Jesus responds by calling them the hypocrites they are, noting that Isaiah "prophesied rightly" about them when he said "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." Those precepts, of course, are the principles and practices of legal exactitude and ritual purity that the Pharisees and scribes are so obsessed with, vs. the vision and reality of the new kingdom we have come to understand is represented by Jesus and his teachings, acceptance, mercy, and so on.

But now here's Jesus himself acting pretty pharisaic in his reply to this woman. This is even more interesting because this woman – although not belonging to the tribe of Israel that Jesus maintains he has come for exclusively – certainly seems to understand Jesus' identity as one who offers healing to all. And inexplicably, in his initial response to the call to that identity by this woman, Jesus actually seems to have forgotten or misplaced those dimensions of acceptance and mercy we have heard him expounding throughout his ministry! Not only that, but the Jesus who has been the friend of lepers, tax-collectors, and a host of many other sorts of "untouchables" or less worthy folks (from the perspective of the Pharisees) – including all women! – here alludes to this woman as no more deserving of his time and blessing than the dogs that are typically seen as particularly unclean creatures even today in many of the cultures of the Middle East.

So acting out of both her understanding of Jesus' identity and her desperation for the health of her daughter, the Canaanite woman calls out to Jesus to exercise precisely that identity. And to be sure, in his first response, Jesus doesn't deny that identity altogether, although he certainly narrows the definition in a way that turns aside the woman's call and while also contradicting our usual understanding of him.

But the woman is not finished with this, and moves closer and kneels to ask Jesus again for the help she absolutely knows he can provide. And even when he dismisses her again with that terrible admonition that it's not fair to take the food destined for children and throw it to the dogs, she challenges his interpretation of his call, his identity yet once more.

In fact, even when Jesus basically suggests that this woman is no more worthy than the dogs, she shows that she's even willing to accept that characterization if she must, and like a dog, continues to pester Jesus even for the least scrap from his table! Her tenacity finally wins out. Now some interpretations about this gospel suggest that this may portray another moment in Jesus' own journey when he sees that his ministry may be larger than he previously understood. In the context of his entire life and work, this could be a reasonable speculation. But at the very least, this portion of Matthew implies that he finally recognizes and accepts the identity that the Canaanite woman already understood and called out to in her plea for mercy and healing.

Well, before this goes on and on and on and on and on, let me limit it to just on and on, and shift over to one of the links of this gospel with some other events that are also connected with this date. The first of these is that this is the day in the church calendar when we honor Jonathan Myrick Daniels, a seminarian and witness for civil rights who, at just age 26, was killed near Montgomery, Alabama, on August 20, 1965. (That particular date in the calendar of saints, martyrs and other church notables was already dedicated to Bernard of Clairvaux, so we honor Jonathon Daniels on August 14th).

You can read more details about Jonathan Daniels' history, discernment, etc., in that wonderful volume published by the church, "Lesser Feasts and Fasts," or through the modern holy of holies, by Googling him. It's enough to say that he experienced a definitive call to the priesthood in the early 1960s, and began his seminary education at the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1963, expecting to graduate in 1966.

In March of 1965, Jonathan Daniels was one of many who answered a second call, this one from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who asked students and clergy come to Selma, Alabama, to take part in a march to Montgomery, the state capital. Daniels and others originally intended to stay in Alabama for only a weekend, but Daniels and a friend of his quickly recognized how much they could help in Selma, and how badly it might appear to the local civil rights workers if they were only willing to stay a few days.

Daniels and his friend went back to Cambridge just long enough to get permission to spend the rest of the semester in Selma, studying on their own and returning to take their exams at the end of the term. The two returned to Selma and over the next few months, Daniels devoted himself to trying to integrate the local Episcopal church. After passing his semester exams, Daniels came back once more to Alabama to assist with tutoring children, helping poor locals apply for aid, and working to register voters.

On August 13, 1965, Daniels was one of a group of 29 protestors who went to picket a whites-only store in another Alabama town. All of the protestors were arrested and taken to jail in another nearby town. Daniels and most of the group were held for six days, refusing to accept bail unless everyone was bailed. They were finally released on August 20th, and Daniels and a white Roman Catholic priest and two black protestors went down the street to get a cold drink at a local grocery store.

They were met at the door by Tom Coleman, an engineer for the Alabama highway department and an unpaid "special" deputy, who wielded a shotgun. Coleman threatened the four, and finally leveled the shotgun at 16-year-old Ruby Sales. Daniels pushed Ruby aside as Coleman fired, and was killed instantly by the full blast from Coleman's shotgun. It will probably be no surprise to any of us that in that day and time, an all-white jury acquitted Coleman of manslaughter in Jonathan Daniels' death.

We are closing in on five decades since Jonathan Myrick answered the call to go to Selma, and the fatal call to push aside Ruby Sales at the risk – and forfeiture – of his own life. Each of us have had many "calls" in our life that perhaps stood to upend our lives in light of new impressions or understandings of what God might want for us or from us.

I'm pained to admit that in my own life, I've sometimes let the call go unanswered, even hoping God wouldn't even bother to leave a voicemail. Once in a while I've answered and accepted the challenge, and sometimes even followed through. Being up here this morning is, in some ways, a response to this kind of call. But I thank God that he has not (yet?) seen fit to send the kind of call that came to Jonathan Daniels, just as I'm sincerely grateful for Jonathan's example of acceptance and his courage.

One more example, in this case of someone or some ones who failed to accept fully the call to protect the innocent, or even the presumed innocent. On the night of August 14, 1944, Guglielmo Olivotto, an Italian Army private and prisoner of war captured in North Africa, was lynched by one or more American soldiers at Fort Lawton. Until I read Jack Hamman's excellent book, On American Soil, I wasn't even aware that Fort Lawton housed up to several hundred Italian POWs during the last year or two of World War II. I suspect this comes as a surprise to most of you as well.

The events surrounding Olivotto's lynching are shrouded in a lot of shoddy police work and a flawed judicial process at Fort Lawton following the discovery of the body early in the morning of August 15. But Hamman's years of exhaustive search of the remaining files available and his interviews with the few surviving veterans who were present at Fort Lawton at the time suggest that Olivotto was probably the victim of a young, poorly educated military policeman from rural Louisiana, who was well known for his hatred and resentment of not only the black troops stationed at Fort Lawton, but the Italian POWs as well.

On the surface, this might seem to be a very different situation than that of Jonathan Myrick Daniels, but I think there's also a connection here and a lesson for us still. One of the great tragedies in the death of Guglielmo Olivotto in 1944 – as it was also at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in 2004 – was the failure to understand that for anyone in authority over any prisoner, an equal responsibility to preventing their escape or unauthorized release is to ensure that they are protected from any harm or abuse, from any source, at any cost.

In the Fort Lawton situation, it's possible that the cultural background experience of this young MP and his abbreviated educational experience (he left school after the ninth grade) simply didn't prepare him to understand this responsibility for himself. But those in authority above this young American private, from the White House on down to the officers in charge of the POWs at Fort Lawton, understood it well. The provisions that were established for detaining the Italian POWs at a number of locations in the western US show an understanding at the highest level of the call to protect these prisoners from any abuse or harm. But unfortunately and tragically for Guglielmo Olivotto and his family and friends and all those affected by his death, although the call to protect was obviously recognized by some with the authority to ensure it was understood and embraced, accepting the responsibility that went with acknowledging that call broke down somewhere down the line.

We understand that we live in a very different society today than that of 1944, or even 1965. But we might want to keep in mind that it can also be a very quick step backward into an understanding that we are here only for our kind, and not for those who aren't worthy even for the crumbs we throw to the dogs. I don't absolutely know if Jesus required the episode of the Canaanite woman to help him see his calling differently, but I think we might. There are still modern versions of the Canaanite woman (or Canaanite man) around us and among us today, and we might want to be mindful of what we have to learn from their pleadings.

Well, let's end with a lighter and sweeter example of call and response. August 14th is also the eighth anniversary of the ordination of The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker. [A brief expression of appreciation on your part is acceptable.] She's talked now and then about the "call" that led up to that, and I suspect she'll be willing to share additional details whenever we ask – or even if we don't ask! 😊. But I just wanted to close with an appreciation of her hearing and accepting that call, of the church acknowledging the same, and of equal importance to us here, of her also responding in the affirmative to the call we issued a year and a half ago to come minister to us and do ministry with us at St. Stephen's.

To finish, then, let me see if I can get a response to a call that is familiar to Stephanie and me and others who grew up or have lived in the South: Can I have an "Amen"?

Amen!

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