

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
August 14, 2005

THE SEARCH FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE
Faith and Reason: Beyond Belief
Matthew 15: 21-28

When I'm faced with an opportunity to preach, and the daunting task to illuminate for example what I might think *The Search for a Meaningful Life*, the focus of my sermon series the next 3 Sundays suggests, I'm convinced stories, personal or collective, often provide good, if not entertaining insight. Since it's been over a month that I've been here with you in Memorial Church, please allow me to indulge you with a quick story while spending last month on the east coast.

Kathy and I had the good fortune to be on Cape Cod in Massachusetts house-sitting for most of July. We had friends come to visit who ventured out on their own one evening. Knowing they would return quite late, we went to sleep, although in the spirit of Motel 6, we left the lights on. I awoke at 2 am, checked to see if they had returned, but no sign. Not to worry, they are adults and I'm not a mother. There's much to explore on the Cape. I retreated back to bed, only to awaken again at 3:30. Still no sign. Now I'm a little worried and begin to envision a number of scenarios. I called the cell phone and left a message. Needless to say, for the next few hours I did not sleep and frankly didn't know what to do.

Kathy got up to begin the morning routine with the dogs, came back and said: You probably won't believe this but...are sleeping in the car in the driveway. I bolted out of bed and said in disbelief, you cannot be serious! What? Why? The door is unlocked and we left the lights on. I stumbled out the front door into the early morning humid, dense, foggy Cape air to see for myself. Through the open car window, this preacher, teacher, known on occasion as remotely articulate could only manage to say: "Hi guys. What are you doing?"

The sleepy explanation ensued: All the doors were locked and we didn't want to wake or frighten you or startle the dogs so we decided to sleep in the car. (in other words, our friends were being polite, thoughtful, kind and generous)

With a voice of reason I suggested they might have knocked or rang the doorbell. (Reason as I understand it is human faculty at our disposal, allowing us to process information, function in the world and make sense of our lives) Our friends of course had left that day, knowing in all good conscience and perhaps with simple faith (faith meaning going beyond our wisdom or accomplishment with or without knowing that we're allowing a higher presence into our lives or an inner voice that tells us what we know to be true) that they would return and walk through an unlocked door, quietly and quickly, even late into the night. Whatever we believed might or could happen was not the topic of conversation. The virtues of particular action (faith and reason integrated and working to complement one another) required on everyone's behalf would have had

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all of us resting in our beds and not two of us in an unfamiliar rental car on an unreasonably humid night. Checking before retiring that doors were in fact unlocked, ringing the doorbell, or pounding on doors were all necessary, though maybe assumed, or seemingly intrusive or harsh. And subsequently reasoning and ultimately believing that friendship is remarkably capable of enduring, if not welcoming, far more serious circumstances.

I appreciate and embrace the value of stories, lighthearted or serious, because I think they happen to be a great life laboratory. Stories, hearing them and telling them, are one way to open us to imagination and creativity for example, by locating ourselves in the middle of one. You could put yourself in this same story and ask what would I have done? How would I have reacted or what would I have thought?

With that in mind I want to bring us into today's gospel story with the Canaanite woman. Upon closer examination, it's been suggested that this is a rather awkward and difficult story in the life and work of Jesus, for he in fact sounds annoyed, if not bordering on harsh, rude and dismissive. He's just come from Nazareth, his hometown and we might speculate weary, disheartened over the fact that even his own friends and family have doubted his authority and been offended by his teaching.

He refuses to answer a woman pleading for his help (one translation simply says "he ignored her"), denies having anything to give to people of her "kind" and finally compares her to a dog before the persistent and relentless force of her faith changes something in Jesus.

This Canaanite woman is problematic because she is one of the great unwashed with whom observant Jewish people of Jesus' time had little or no contact. She comes from a region, Syria, where strange gods are worshipped. She is a Gentile, which is a biblical term for everyone who is not Jewish. As such she is considered "the other" - both an outsider and untouchable. We can find ourselves in this story because I suspect there is not one of us here this morning who at one time or another, has not felt like an outsider, unlovable, or simply dismissed because we did not fit the criteria, be it ethnic, sexual, gender, socioeconomic, intellect, personal, physical or religious. We did not meet the expectations not only of our own family and friends, but society, and dare I say, even organized religion. More often than not, we fear we stand outside the circle and look in. The lines have been drawn.

Shockingly so, the gospel story today might suggest that even Jesus drew a line with the Canaanite woman. He's not going to waste his energy on a Gentile woman. *I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel* it says in today's gospel. There are limits. But the story does not end there, for the Canaanite is commended at the last for her great faith and how it presumably had a powerful impact on Jesus.

In fact, as some scholars suggest, you can almost hear a huge wheel of history turning, as lines and limits for him vanished, and that he himself began to sense a new understanding

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of who he is and what he'd been called to do. Old boundaries no longer can contain a new vision, no more hanging on to cherished notions about the way things ought to be. No more certainty about anything. Perhaps even for Jesus the search for a meaningful life looked for him like he could no longer control or narrow the scope of God's purpose or possibility. Even in the context of this story, faith and reason are in concert with one another, where faith is not the absence of reason, but a skill in its own right, which, when cultivated, allows us to experience more than we ever anticipated. Faith can be a positive force in our lives, no less integral to the human soul than the faculty to think or to feel. Reason may tell us how to live, but faith may tell us why to live.

A writer came to meet a wise teacher and suggested that many people seemed to be non-believers. The teacher disagreed. People are natural believers. There may be doubts; to question God, however is the first indication that one believes in something. You must have some acceptance of God even to question God. "But if they believe, why don't they act on it?" the writer asked.

They are afraid of their faith, the teacher replied. They fear the demands their faith might put upon them, that they might have to forego some of their comfort, or compromise some of their ideas. They fear changing their lives."

Perhaps some of you read the same essay I did in the August issue of Harper's Magazine by Bill McKibben entitled: *The Christian Paradox, How a Faithful Nation Gets Jesus Wrong*. Let me offer a few statistics cited in this essay for starters:

"Three quarters of American believe the bible teaches that God helps those who help themselves. Yes, 3 out of 4 Americans believe this, a notion at the very core of our current individualistic politics and culture, which was in fact uttered by Ben Franklin and does not appear in Holy Scripture. Few ideas could be further from the gospel message with its radical summons to love of neighbor." (Even the labeled Canaanites among us)

"Further", writes McKibben, "ours is among the most spiritually homogenous rich nations on earth. Depending on which poll you look at and how the question is asked, somewhere around 85 % of us call ourselves Christian. Israel, by way of comparison, is 77% Jewish. It is true that a smaller number of Americans – 75% - claim they actually pray to God on a daily basis, and only 33% percent say they get to church every week. Even if that 85% overstates actual practice, it clearly represents aspiration." "In fact," continues McKibben, "there is nothing else that unites more than four-fifths of America. Every other statistic one can cite about American behavior is essentially also a measure of the behavior of professed Christians. That's what America is: a place saturated in Christian identity and belief."

But is it Christian?

Whether you agree with it or not, the troubling paradox McKibben's essay illuminates is the evident disconnect between belief and action, that is the Christianity of the gospels, with its call for deep sharing and personal sacrifice has been replaced with competing

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creeds. (CREED: an accepted system of religious or other belief) And I'm not thinking about the Apostles Creed that is recited week after week in many religious communities, Here are two quick examples from the essay: Majority House Leader Tom Delay listened to his own pastor urge the flock to support the administration declaring that the war between America and Iraq is the gateway to the Apocalypse, otherwise known as the creed of the End Times. But what is even more troubling than this is another competing creed, which McKibben contends looks all too conventional. "That is, the relentless focus on you and your individual needs. Sprawling megachurches that service consumers, not communities but individuals. Here is a creed of comfort the comfortable, personal empowerment faith that is sadly and disturbingly veiling the actual remarkable message of the gospels. This theology is appealing for another reason: it coincides with what people want to believe." Belief without genuine discourse can provide the context in which scriptural literalism and religious violence can never be adequately opposed. "How nice it would be if Jesus had declared that our income was ours to keep, instead of insisting that we had to share. How satisfying it would be if we were supposed to hate our enemies."

I'm recognizing that I'm nearly 15 minutes into this sermon, and before I lose you I want to cut to the chase. Allow me to retreat to that simple, less than articulate sentence I muttered that muggy morning on Cape Cod: Hi guys. What are you doing? What are we doing?

Let me shape that now as a clarion call today to declare that the search for a meaningful life has at its core the dynamic relationship of faith and reason that may include though are far beyond belief. What are we doing? Do faith and reason need to be looked at anew as tools to use to reveal sanctity in our lives? Is faith all we need? Is reason enough? What if things hadn't worked out for the Canaanite woman as they did? Is true faith after all more about where we stand after things have not worked out the way we thought or would have liked? This overwhelming connection between America and Christianity cannot be left to those who have hijacked the core of the Christian message in particular and finding true meaning in our lives to a series of causes that have little to do with the teachings of Jesus. McKibben and others have helped me realize that by their very boldness they have convinced far too many people they must know what they're talking about, even if a majority of us here are not among those who are convinced in the least. (I am mindful of the fact that we have the luxury of geography and demographics amidst an exceptional research university and the remarkably diverse, progressive Bay Area)

Yes we may have doubts. Yes we are horrified by the neediness and suffering in the world. Yes we want to confront God in fact for seemingly allowing tragedies. When we witness suffering at the hands of other people, should we not direct our anger where it belongs? Do war and genocide show us that our faith in humanity is severely misplaced? Does it mean we can no longer have faith in God? Is true faith not the blind faith of ignorance, but a direct connection to God's essence and therefore neither arbitrary nor conditional? (Now you must return for next week's sermon: What does God have to do

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with this search for a meaningful life?) Has faith unfortunately been reduced to our belief in God being dependent on God doing things the way we want? I want to suggest that our search for a meaningful life is nourished by the powerful dynamic of faith and reason, where to seek to understand ourselves and perceive God we employ our mind and its finite tools of logic to embark on a lifelong quest, expanding the scope of our reason to fulfill not only its power but also its limitations. With this dynamic at work, might we discover that faith is no mere crutch for the ignorant, but in fact something that indicates a journey traveled far with both mind and heart, finally reaching a threshold that might only be crossed with a leap of faith? There is rarely a week that passes that I do not have a conversation with someone about the deep hunger for meaning that many are searching for. It is a conversation that cuts across all religious traditions, Spiritual practices, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This I'm convinced is a tribute to the deepest faith of all. Despite the specific statistics of our religious identity in this nation, I will be bold enough to say that we are yet still living in a time of spiritual darkness. But I remain undoubtedly hopeful because the good news is that this is where the deepest faith simmers. One is when we realize it is dark, and yearn to see; the other, when the darkness has been so intense and so long-lived that we have resigned ourselves to it.

“Taking seriously the actual message of Jesus” noted Mckibben, “should at least moderate the greed and violence that mark this culture. It’s hard to imagine a con much more audacious than making Christ the front man for a program of tax cuts for the rich or war in Iraq. If some modest part of the 85 percent of us who are Christians woke up to that fact, then the world might change.”

It has been said: “We live in a time of bad language. What new sorts of religious outlook might replace what we have lost?”

America’s and our own spiritual vocabulary – “with its huge defining terms such as God, soul, sacrifice, mysticism, faith, salvation, grace, reason, redemption – has been enduring a series of abuses so constricting that the damage may last for centuries. The defamation of a religious vocabulary cannot be undone by turning away; the harm is undone when we work to reopen each word’s true history, nuance and depth.”

“Holy words”, wrote David James Duncan, “need stewardship as surely as do gardens, orchards or ecosystems. When lovingly tended, such words surround us with spaciousness and mystery the way a sacred grove surrounds us with peace and oxygenated air. But when we abandon our holy words and fail to replace them, we end up living in a spiritual clear-cut.”

I’m quite certain that our search for a meaningful life has much to do with holy words. Keeping the big questions alive is as important as answering them. All of which does require a healthy dose of faith and reason, along with generous trust and humility. The story of the Canaanite woman today is not lost on us. Her faith was clearly not ignorant and was far greater than even Jesus imagined. Consequently, there was no going back to the limits even he observed.

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Perhaps then, in this lifelong quest for meaning we would do well to realize that the face of God can and does show up anywhere, even on the far sides of the lines we have drawn for ourselves.

We arrange our lives as best we can, to keep your holiness at bay, with our pieties, our doctrines, our liturgies, our moralities, our secret ideologies.

Safe, virtuous, settled;

And then you – you and your dreams, you and your visions, you and your purposes, you and your commands, you and our neighbors.

We find your holiness not at bay, but probing, pervading, insisting, demanding.

And we yield, sometimes gladly, sometimes resentfully, sometimes late..or soon.

We yield because you, beyond us, are our God. We are your creatures met by your holiness, by your holiness made our true selves.

And we yield.

Amen.

(Walter Bruggemann)

The Christian Paradox: How a Faithful Nation Gets Jesus Wrong; Bill McKibben; Harper's Magazine, August 2005

From Eden to Armageddon; Veering Right on the Road to Salvation; David James Duncan; Orion, July/August 2005

Toward a Meaningful Life; The Wisdom of the Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson; Simon Jacobson; Harper Collins, New York, 1995, 2002

Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth; Walter Bruggemann; Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 2003