

Faith With Attitude

I'm going to read a quote. I don't know who said it; I don't know where it's from. Don't think a lot about it; just let someone come to mind that represents this sentiment in your life.

“Be The Kind Of Woman That When Your Feet Hit the Floor Each Morning The Devil Says, ‘Oh Crap, She’s Up!’”

(Poll the congregation - Who is your person? Why does that person represent this quote?)

Do you hear in this quote an understanding that this woman is trouble in a bad way or in a good way? Is this a woman you would hang out with, follow or marry?

A co-worker sent this to me I believe as a compliment. I think this is a tribute to a woman with an attitude. An attitude that doesn't back down. An attitude that stares back at injustice, insult, insensitivity and inadequacy and says, "Wait a minute! I am bigger and better and worthy of more."

Does the person you thought of previously fit this bill?

When looked up the lectionary passages for today's worship several weeks ago and saw that the gospel story was about Jesus and the Syrophenician woman, I was thrilled. Every time I saw the quote we just discussed hanging next to my desk, I thought of her. This is a woman with attitude. This is a mom who would do what it takes for her child even if it meant copping a little attitude with Jesus. I like her!

But do I like Jesus in this story? Talk about an attitude! It's rather unsettling, don't you think? If I had to form an opinion about Jesus on this story alone I would most certainly not be impressed. I would describe Jesus using words like racist, chauvinist, supremacist. This is clearly a man who is lauded for showing compassion and love to others yet when it comes down to practicing what he preaches, his compassion and love are only for his own kind – Jews. Gentiles are just dogs unworthy of “food” – even the heavenly kind.

So what's the deal with this story? Why did the gospel writers include it? Is the message really as it seems?

How do you figure out something you don't understand?

When I am out hiking with a group of students and we come upon a nature mystery, I always encourage the kids to do two things, use what they see and use what they know to figure out answers to the nature question. Let's say we come upon a track in the snow. I have them simply describe it to me. Seems elementary but great information is gained from simple observation: how big is the track, it's it leaping or walking, what kind of habitat are we in? Then we go through what we know from study or from experience: we're in a forest and the track is small, leaping and ends at the base of a tree. What animals do we know that leap? What animals do we know that leap and live in trees? What animals do we know that leap live in trees and are active in the winter? Ta-da! What is it?

When we read something in the Bible that doesn't sit right, why not ask the same questions? We can't really see the story happening but we can pretend we're there.

Close your eyes and enter the story:

From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there.

- How does Jesus look - tired, frustrated, spent? Strain to see his face - what does it tell you? Is it ;the face of a mere man or the Son of God?

Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet.

- There is noise around you but it is typical of the time of day - people going about their business for the most part.
- Where did she come from? Was she hiding somewhere?
- Did you see her when you saw Jesus go into the house?

Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin.

- Oh, she's one of them! You know how we feel about non-Jews, esp. from that area. Is there a bad taste in your mouth just being in her presence? Does she even have right to talk to Jesus?

She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.

- Well, I guess we know how Jesus felt about her. He called her a dog. How fitting. Don't you agree? Huh, I thought this Jesus guy was supposed to be more compassionate...all about justice and love.

'But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.

- What! Did she just give Jesus attitude? Can you see his face? Is he angry or surprised? Maybe he has a smirk on his face? What do you see?

'Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.

- I'm lost...is he mad or did he see her tenacity as a sign of faith? Did Jesus just give her a little attitude in return?

'So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Open your eyes. You were there...what did you see, hear or feel? What was the tone of voice of the woman? of Jesus?

I can hear what you're saying...nice visualization exercise but we still were never actually there. That's true so let's start with the other question instead: What do we know?

I am not a biblical scholar so I can't stand here and give you all the scholarly answers of how this story fits into the biblical narrative. What I can tell you is what I know of Jesus from growing up in church, listening to teachers and preachers, reading my Bible and encountering Christ in my own life.

Yes, Jesus has an attitude. It is an attitude of love, mercy, peace, understanding, humility, service and inclusiveness. Did I miss anything? What did Jesus say is the greatest commandment? (anyone?)

John 13:34

I give you a new commandment, that you **love one another**. Just as I have loved you, you also should **love one another**.

What I know tells me that I cannot and should not take this verse at face value. I believe Jesus did not torment this woman but tested her. He wanted to see if she had an attitude that included faith. He didn't care if she was a gentile. He didn't care if she was Syrophenician? He only cared that she realized her worth. In His eyes all are worthy.

It is so easy to have an attitude that judges. An attitude that says, "You people might think you're right but I know you have it all wrong." But this is not what Paul was talking about when he said:

Philippians 2: 4-5

Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

In the coming week, spend time with the Syrophenician woman. Take an attitude lesson from her. Don't tell people that they're wrong or what to think but lead them by challenging the norm. Help them to search for answers, their own answers. Lead them with an attitude fitting of Christ.