

Proper 15A
Peace, Seattle
August 17, 2014
Matthew 15:21-28

SCRAPS FROM THE TABLE

We saw them in every major city we visited and in smaller ones, too.

And we were warned by travel bloggers and hosts that when we traveled on trains, buses, metros and through crowded piazzas, it was they, the Romani—the so-called “Gypsies”—we must keep our eyes on. For it was they, we were told, who were responsible for most of the thefts in those crowded and opportune places; and they who would pose as beggars, or employ simple con artist tricks to get you to shell out your money.

“Watch out for their children,” we were warned, “they look younger than they really are. And beware of people in teams who stage arguments as diversion tactics to get at your valuables.”

So we watched.

And I learned to look for people whom I thought might fit that description and to regard them suspiciously. I became a racial profiler. And when we found ourselves traveling with them on a packed bus or metro train, or moving through a crowded piazza, we held our bags and the hands of our kids tightly.

Let there be no mistake, pick-pocketing and other forms of thievery are a real problem.

On the local train from Sorrento to Naples we witnessed a theft with our own eyes when, just before the train doors closed, a man tore a woman’s necklace right off her neck, and was out the door and gone in a matter of seconds. Was he Romani? I don’t know.

But I DO know something felt wrong to me about the profiling I found myself caught up in.

It made me feel like a prejudiced and paranoid louse, and I never grew comfortable with it even though I found myself accepting it as a necessary evil that seemed to come with the territory of international travel.

Our most memorable encounters with Romani people were in the city of Venice.

The streets of Venice are narrow, winding trails—at times no more than six feet wide—that grow wider in the retail areas of town and near the piazzas and smaller squares.

Our lodging was in the less frequented northern side of Venice, and we would begin most days by threading our way south on a zigzagging route that took us to San Marco square.

As we walked that path we often saw beggars along the way.

One man was there every evening outside Santa Maria Nova Church. We’d turn the corner and there he’d be, up on his knees, his body as impassive as a statue, eyes focused straight ahead, holding his cup.

But the encounter I remember most clearly was with woman. She wore the thickly layered skirt, tunic and head scarf of the Romani, but how old she was it was hard to tell, for when we came upon her she was prostrate on the cobbled street, her forehead resting on the stones, the cup in her hands thrust out in what seemed for all the world to be a desperate act of prayer.

We could see nothing of her face; we couldn't tell if she was awake or asleep—all that distinguished her from a discarded pile of rags were those brown, weathered fingers surrounding that cup.

As we passed by her, Chris stooped to drop some coins in her cup, and then put some fruit and crackers near her outstretched hands and touched her gently. Startled, she lifted her head accepted the gift. And we were on our way again.

We knew nothing of the woman's circumstances or her family's story, and next to nothing of the story of her people. But that posture of hers!—legs folded under, head and chest flat to the ground, arms extended, communicated as much desperation as any of the masterful paintings and frescoes we'd seen in the great museums of Europe.

We had learned to look past so much during our travels, but her we could not ignore.

Let's allow her to accompany us into our gospel story.

It's a story that's hard to take at face value, because when we do the Jesus we encounter surprises us, maybe even offends us.

Jesus, fresh from a debate with Pharisees and scribes about what it means to be pure and holy before God, leaves Galilee for the northern Mediterranean coast.

Now in the Bible a place is never just a place.

Because of ancient beliefs about the connection between group identity and geographic location, it's always significant when a writer calls attention to the setting of a story. Matthew is telling us that Jesus is leaving familiar Jewish territory for a region that belongs to non-Jews—Tyre and Sidon.

What his purpose was in going there we have no way of knowing, but what takes place there has a deep and lasting effect on the course of his ministry and the mission of the church that followed in his footsteps.

Almost as soon as Jesus crosses the border, he's confronted by a Canaanite woman who is desperate to have your her disturbed daughter healed.

She has two strikes against her even before their conversation begins:

First - she's a woman.

Second - not only is she a not a child of Israel—a child of the Promise—she is a Canaanite, a member of the ethnic group that has been sworn enemies to the Jews for centuries.

When Jews told stories about Canaanites, I can imagine it sounded something like—

“Avoid them, they're dirty, they're sneaky, they're thieves.”

And I imagine that when Canaanites told stories about Jews, their stories were similar.

But this woman has a daughter who is ill—and for her sake, she'll risk anything—even if it means begging for the help of a Jewish man in public.

The first time Jesus hears the woman shouting SON OF DAVID, he ignores her, which is odd, right? We don't expect that of Jesus—he's supposed to be compassionate, caring and responsive at all times. Yet here he is, flatly ignoring this woman who's crying out on behalf of her daughter.

But ignoring her doesn't work. She continues to hound him. In fact, she's so persistent that his disciples get fed up. TELL HER TO GET LOST, JESUS—SHE KEEPS SHOUTING AT US!

Now if this had happened in Venice—with her making that kind of commotion, the Cabinieri would have hauled her away—that kind of hassling of money paying guests is not tolerated.

But Matthew has put a fundamental question between the lines of the story and it's this:
IS THIS WOMAN A DISTRACTION FROM GOD'S TRUE MISSION?
OR DOES SHE REPRESENT GOD'S TRUE MISSION?

Jesus' response sounds cold and calculated:

I WAS SENT ONLY TO THE LOST SHEEP OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL, he tells her.

As if to say: THE WORLD IS FULL OF PEOPLE IN NEED; BUT MY FIRST RESPONSIBILITY IS TO THE CHILDREN OF THE PROMISE, A CATEGORY THAT DOESN'T INCLUDE YOU.

His words are clear. But the woman won't give up easily.

Again she steps in front of him, kneels down, face to the cobbles, hands outstretched, and again begs him for help.

This time his rebuff has even more of an edge to it.

IT'S NOT FAIR, he says, TO TAKE THE CHILDREN'S FOOD AND THROW IT TO THE DOGS.

Ouch! Most would have given up and slinked away after such rejection—wouldn't you?—but this woman won't take NO for an answer.

Instead, she does Jesus one better in the best come-back line you'll hear in the whole New Testament:

YOU MAY LOOK UPON US AS DOGS, BUT EVEN THE DOGS UNDER THE TABLE GET TO EAT THE MASTER'S CRUMBS.

Touché.

WOMAN, GREAT IS YOUR FAITH! LET IT BE DONE FOR YOU AS YOU WISH.

And her daughter is healed instantly.

Is she a distraction? Or is she the mission?

Was that Romani woman lying in our path in Venice a distraction to our experience, or was she somehow at the center of it?

What mission is God putting in front of you today?

Is it possible that those things you consider distractions are really the heart and sole of what God is calling you to do?

The prophet Isaiah understood this debate well. No doubt, some grumbled when they heard the words: MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLES.

Spiritually beaten and discouraged by their captivity, many exiles could have asked why God was not more sensitive to their need to draw into themselves after all they had suffered.

Why put out the welcome mat to foreigners when it was foreigners who had stolen their lives from them?

But God has no interest in a temple or a church that is little more than a religious clubhouse.

The church's fundamental mission is not to exclude but to invite all people to a life of trusting, hoping and loving.

In Matthew's story the Canaanite woman asks Jesus to stop focusing simply on Israel. And he responds by acknowledging her faith. Is she a distraction, or is she the mission?

This is the question not only in this story but in the lives we live everyday no matter what our vocation.

And the answer? Well, it all depends, doesn't it.

I have a feeling you and I will have to be asking the question again and again.

As we gather around this Table Christ has prepared for us, a Table of abundance, a Table where healing and community are found, his intentions become crystal clear:

In God's eyes, we are all worth dying for. All worth redeeming. All worth feeding, healing, forgiving.

Thanks be to God! Amen.