

Reflection: August 16, 2020

Romans 10:8-15; Matthew 15:21-28

This morning in my reflection, I want to intersect two stories. One, from the gospel – the story of a Canaanite mother who challenges Jesus. And I acknowledge the helpfulness of some insights from the Rev. Audrey Louder, President of the Fundy St Lawrence Dawning Waters Regional Council in interpreting this story. The other is from the May 2020 issue of Guideposts magazine, a story told by the mother of a boy named Ryan White.

It was December 1984 and Ryan had just turned 13 when he was diagnosed with hemophilia. He and his sister Andrea were being raised by a single Mom whose name was Jeanne. And they lived in Kokomo, Indiana. Both Ryan and Andrea had been born there, as had their mother, and father, and maternal grandparents. Kokomo was one of those places you weren't ever supposed to leave ... Kokomo took care of you. It was home.

And then, Ryan was diagnosed with AIDS.

He was taken, just a short time before Christmas, to the J.W. Riley Hospital for Children in Indianapolis.

Investigating his pneumonia led to the diagnosis of AIDS - which he had contracted from a deadly virus lurking in a blood product used to treat his hemophilia. Because Ryan loved Christmas so much, his Mom decided to hold the diagnosis from him til after the holiday celebration.

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Looking back, Jeanne says that two incidents at Riley Children's Hospital should have warned her of what was to come. First was a snatch of conversation in the cafeteria, a nurse speaking to a doctor: "I will not go into that boy's room," she insisted. "I don't care what they say about not being able to catch it; I'm not taking a chance." And Jeanne remembers it wasn't just what the nurse was saying that was most upsetting, but the hard edge of fear in her voice.

Secondly, was when two of Ryan's favorite middle school teachers showed up to deliver a big batch of get well wishes from his classmates. Though Ryan himself did not yet know his AIDS diagnosis, his Mom decided she should share it with his teachers. Immediately, they paled and, fumbling, pushed the cards into her hands. "We shouldn't bother him," one of them said, and quick as that, they were gone (even though they'd driven more than an hour from Kokomo just to see Ryan).

By Christmas Eve, Ryan's pneumonia had cleared enough that he could be taken off the ventilator and he was able to talk once again. The day after Christmas, his Mom told him he had AIDS. Ryan didn't cry. He didn't even seem scared. He just wanted to know when he could go back to school. He wanted to get on with his life.

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That night, before she left his room, Ryan's Mom switched on a little plastic guardian angel that church friends from Kokomo had given him when he was in and out of hospital with hemophilia. It was just a battery-operated night light, but Ryan always had it by his bed whenever he was hospitalized.

The next morning, Ryan told his mother something incredible. "Mom," he said matter-of-factly, "I saw Jesus last night. He told me that I had nothing to worry about. He promised he would take care of me."

When his Mom asked him "What did Jesus look like?" Ryan just kind of smiled and said, "Well, he didn't look anything like that picture I have hanging in my room." And he never again mentioned the incident. But his Mom couldn't help but hope that maybe God would work a miracle and cure Ryan.

It was February when Ryan went home from hospital, but still recuperating, he missed the rest of the school year. By summer, he was well enough to get a paper route and hang out with his friends. And as summer passed, he began agitating to go back to school.

But the school board wouldn't let him back. Everybody was afraid, despite overwhelming medical evidence that AIDS wasn't contracted through casual everyday contact. A court finally forced the Board to relent and Ryan went

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back to school. But only for a day. Because a group of parents brought a law suit to bar Ryan from the school. Eventually, after months of a court case, a judge affirmed Ryan's right to attend school. But by then, the damage was done. Kokomo had hardened its heart against one of its own.

In Matthew's gospel, we have another story ... where someone of desperate need struggles to have her voice heard. In the incident from today's reading, it would seem that Jesus' humanity comes through ... for it appears that HE had hardened his heart against one of God's own. Sure, as a Canaanite, and as a woman, the mother who came seeking healing for her child was an outsider, looked down upon by the prevailing Jewish culture. The disciples begged Jesus: "Tell her to go away ... tell her to leave us alone ..." To them, she was an inconvenience, an unwelcome interruption and a bother! (and hardly deserving of Jesus' attention!)

And I wonder ... how many of us see ourselves in those disciples? I wonder ... who are the ones we wish would go away? First Nations people challenging us to live out the apology which we, as a church and a country have made? Voices of the "Black Lives Matter" movement, calling us to recognize and challenge the injustice of systemic racism? Gay and lesbian couples in loving

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relationship who seek to make a commitment and be blessed through a marriage ceremony in the church? And how do we respond to the cry of lonely seniors with no one to visit ... the desperation of those who have been victimized by domestic violence and abuse ... the hopelessness of the one with an incurable disease, even one like AIDS or Covid-19, that makes us want to run away and hide in fear?

“She’s a nuisance,” the disciples say. “Get rid of her, Jesus!” Well, that may be what we would expect from the disciples, who continually failed to “get it” ... but it’s hardly what we would expect from Jesus. Wasn’t Jesus one who drew the circle wide? Who broke down barriers that excluded and marginalized? Who was all about meeting another’s need? Who was open and loving, embracing all economic groups, all social classes, all ethnicities, all skin colours?

Jesus had time for everyone. Jesus welcomed sinners into his circle. Outsiders had a place of honor at the table. Children were invited to sit on his knee. Even with his eyes set on Jerusalem, Jesus took time to heal the sick and restore sight to the blind. But... not here! Not this time. In the course of their dialogue, Jesus even degrades the woman, in essence calling her a dog. And while some commentaries try to pretty it up, it’s

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written... right there. Jesus says, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and give it to the dogs.” Are you shocked that such words of insult could be put in Jesus’ mouth? Wasn’t Jesus above the attitudes and rhetoric of a society that drew lines and set limits around who was acceptable to God and who wasn’t, who was in and who was out?

But that mother does not give up ... “Yes, Lord,” she replies, “but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” She cares that her child is sick. She kneels at Jesus’ feet. She pleads with him. She refuses to take no for an answer ... There is no way to know what went on in Jesus’ head that day. There is no way to know what great epiphany came upon him. Was he moved by compassion? Was his mind changed by this woman’s devotion to her child? Did the words of the prophet Isaiah come back to him... that God would give the Servant to be “a light to the nations that God’s salvation may reach to the ends of the earth?” (Isa. 49: 6).

The story, as recounted by Matthew, says that it was the woman’s faith that changed the course of the story. But it isn’t just this one story, but the whole gospel story that is changed by this encounter with an awkward woman of foreign ancestry in a gentile town. Because from this point on, Jesus’ ministry is not just to the lost

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sheep, not just to the Jewish people of an ancient time and place; from this point on, Jesus' ministry is a ministry to all the nations. Through a painful encounter with an awkward, persistent woman, one who does not give up, Jesus grows in his self-understanding and accepts a new vision of his mission.

And if nothing else, this story is a reminder to us all that there is no one outside the circle of God's love and compassion.

Going back to the story about Ryan, he was glad when finally he was allowed back in school – but then there were the crazy rumours and lies – Some said that Ryan spat on food or tried to bite people. Parents didn't let their children associate with him. Kids would run away from him, as he walked down the hall. His locker was defaced with obscenities.

But Ryan was tough, generally being able to shrug these things off ... And he actually told his Mom he was more disgusted with the people who *claimed* to support him but were afraid to take a stand, than with those who openly attacked him.

On Easter Sunday, 1987, Ryan and his family were in church, sitting in the back pew. When it came time for the traditional greeting of peace, folks turned to the people in the pews behind them with a handshake and the words "Peace be with you." As the greeting rolled to the

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back of the church, his Mom glanced over at Ryan, who stood, smiling, with his hand outstretched. But no one would shake his hand. And she wondered how much more her son could take. He was on a medical roller coaster, in and out of the hospital with the kinds of illnesses that plague AIDS patients. Yet he held on. He had faith. Each time he was hospitalized, he brought his little plastic angel. And his Mom waited and prayed... for a miracle.

The next Sunday, while they were at church, a bullet shattered their home's picture window. And Ryan announced: "Mom, it's time to get out of Kokomo." And so they moved 20 miles south to a community called Cicero.

Amazingly, Ryan's new high school accepted him with open arms. The students themselves had decided to get together for AIDS awareness classes. They invited expert speakers and offered counselling to anyone who was afraid. The truth was, when the issue was left to the kids, they handled it much better than the adults.

Ryan's story became known ...he appeared on television and traveled the country speaking to people about AIDS. Everywhere he went, AIDS patients told him that because of his public battle, Ryan had eased the way for them. "See Mom," Ryan said, "some good did come from that mess back in Kokomo."

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Just as good came to the Canaanite mother who sought her daughter's healing. With her persistent pleading and her challenge, Jesus was moved by the woman's faith... and he experienced a kind of transformation, a change of attitude, which opened *his* heart in compassion ... and the daughter was healed.

Think of your own life ... What attitudes or ways of thinking have been changed because of an encounter that was transformational? Where have you become more accepting, more affirming of the other who, though different from you, you are now able to embrace as a beloved child of God?

There is no doubt that the height, breadth, and depth of God's compassion still troubles some people, even within the church today. For the many who think in terms of scarcity, fear, or suspicion, only limits can keep them safe. They hoard God's grace, afraid to share it. They erect walls and set boundaries, resulting in a deepening polarization. People of different political views, economic conditions, ethnic backgrounds, sexual identities, religious convictions are daily demonized and dismissed. And as our social order in Canada becomes more deeply polarized, it becomes easier for many to decide whom to exclude from the circle of God's love.

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But the gospel reminds us - no one can limit the grace of God. And *if* there is something that the church has to offer our shifting society, could it be the visible demonstration of how people of different viewpoints and backgrounds not only tolerate one another ... but also love and appreciate each other?

Over and over again, God speaks through encounters with strangers and in situations outside of our individual comfort zones, calling us to open our hearts, and our doors; to put our faith first and our fear and anxiety second. Just think ... could you be the one whom God uses to whisper the word of love or acceptance that a person most needs to hear? Could our church be the place where true welcome is extended and a sense of real belonging is fostered?

As followers of the Way, we learn and grow when we brush up against people whose lives, needs, dreams, and struggles are different from ours. These encounters are like sandpaper on a piece of rough wood; smoothing the undisciplined edges of life and making us into a new creation; a servant of the living God.

We can change. And then we can change the world.
With God's help. Amen