

Church of the Advent

September 9, 2018

Tenacious Faith

What would you not do for your child? No matter how young or old, how good or rotten, how grateful or prodigal our children might be, I dare say that most of us would say that there is nothing in our power that we would not do to secure our children's health, safety and happiness. Sometimes this is so second nature that we don't even acknowledge the choices and sacrifices we make for them—the sleepless nights, the worry by proxy, the subtle undergirding of their lives with our vigilance to their dreams and their mistakes. Other times we agonize over our support—is it enough? Is it too much? Are we spoiling them? Are we enabling them? Are we letting them loose into a world that will swallow them up in a sea of bad choices or bad luck?

I know I struggled with hyper-vigilance when my boys were young, and recognize that my need to be held responsible for their staying alive was neither rational nor always healthy. It is no wonder that my older son who was raised in small Southern towns without benefit of 4-wheelers, motorcycles, trampolines, corner store fireworks or guns (not even paint ball guns) turned to mountain bike riding and deer hunting as an adult, though I was relieved when a few years ago his wife said she put her foot down when he wanted to learn to sky dive. Of course I was never a stress to my parents, right?

All of this is to say that we each have a place and a perspective from which to enter our gospel story today—because even if we are not a parent, we are somebody’s child. And we need an entry point to this story, because it is a hard one to hear. In this story, about a sick child and a desperate mother seeking her healing, Jesus does not behave like we expect—he is rude and cranky and dismissive—inconsistent with the loving and accepting Jesus we are drawn to.

So what was happening here? Jesus and his disciples had walked from the Sea of Galilee to a coastal city of Phoenicians—who were not Israelites. Jesus had been trying to get away from the crowds—for rest, and for a time for mourning after the death of his cousin, John the Baptist, recently beheaded in the courts of Herod. You might think it would have been easier to hide in a world with no phone calls and no texting, but evidently not. Word of mouth was pretty efficient, and the stories of Jesus’s power to perform miracles and to heal people had preceded him.

Then a foreign woman of Syrian origin, a Gentile, worked her way into the house where Jesus had been seeking refuge and threw herself at his feet. She was alone, and breached all norms by approaching a Jewish teacher without invitation, and without any male kin to introduce her. But her little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit—likely an illness causing seizures or fits—and she would have done anything to help her. This perception of demon possession would have rendered the child and her mother unclean,

making them outcasts who had caused the devastating illness by their own sin. Did the woman consider any possible negative consequences in her approach to the healer? Did she feel she had nothing to lose? She must have heard that Jesus had healed other people's daughters, and even a raving maniac, so why not her little daughter?

Jesus, however, was *not* himself. Was he overtired, or maybe too burned out to welcome *anyone*, much less a foreign woman with yet another problem? Everyone had problems, and everyone wanted *him* to *fix* them. How exhausting it must have been to carry so many expectations. He still had not managed to get even his closest disciples to understand *who* he was, *where* he came from and *what* he was supposed to do. Though his healing powers had brought him celebrity, they had not fully unlocked the full mystery of his mission and he carried the burden of salvation alone. Even his own hometown had rejected him as nothing more than the carpenter's son they had always known; even his own mother could not save him from their scorn.

And so he snapped at this foreign woman, equating her to a *little dog* unworthy of his time and energy, which he needed to save the chosen people of Israel from themselves. Who do you think you are? Shoo, go away, don't waste my time because I don't have much left and there is so much I have to do. To everyone's surprise, this insult did not work; she did *not* go away. She

swallowed her shame and her fear and boldly confronted Jesus, demanding what little dogs are due, the discarded leftovers thrown under the table. This was her *daughter* she had come to save, and he could insult her all he wanted, as long as he would throw just a scrap of his healing power towards her helpless child. And he did. Her daughter was healed in the moment of recognition between Jesus and this foreign Gentile woman who had broken all the rules. Her faith and persistence and sacrifice of her own dignity were offered for her child's healing, and the child was made well again.

I think Jesus might have been healed a bit in that moment, too—healed of his frustration, his fatigue, his grief and his despair that his disciples and his followers would ever understand his mission. Perhaps his own mother had been praying to God for her child's safety, his peace, his success, *his* healing. Perhaps his Father in heaven was acting to secure his health and happiness. So Jesus got up and got going, soon meeting the man whose ears were opened and whose tongue was loosened by spit on the healer's fingers. What a wonder that miracle would have been to his mother—what rejoicing would have been heard in his household at the sound of the man's voice for the first time in his life.

There are moments in parent-child relationships that are exquisite and beautiful, and moments that are chaotic and desperate; most of them are not truly within our power, no matter how hard we try. But our faith can make us as tenacious as little dogs under the table, because we know that even a scrap of the

power of Jesus Christ in our lives can heal our doubt and anxiety and fear of what is otherwise beyond our control.

We are about to live into that tenacious faith in the sacrament of Baptism. Joseph Arthur Medford will be presented to be washed in the water, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever, as the rest of us—parents, godparents and the whole congregation—promise to do all in our power to support his life in Christ. And throughout the lifetime of parental vigilance that will surely be expended on his behalf—from immunizations to bike helmets to swimming lessons to attempted avoidance of all potentially life-threatening activities masquerading as acceptable fun—by those who love him and would do *anything* to secure his health and happiness in the world—offering him a life in Christ is surely the most important. And so we shall. AMEN

