

Although it's usually great seeing you here, today--not so much. The very fact that you and I are here sends a very bad signal. It means that we've been left behind. The Rapture (an unbiblical invention) occurred yesterday at sunset; and we remain. Although I had not thought about it until a National Public Radio Report yesterday, being left behind does have its benefits. We can still walk our dogs.

Yesterday's weekend edition of "All Things Considered" reported on the entrepreneurial spirit of one Bart Centre whose company, Eternal Earth-Bound Pets, promises to look after the beloved pets of owners spirited to heaven. For a mere \$135 (plus \$20 for each additional pet; PayPal accepted), pet owners are assured their animals will have the best of care. Business, he says, has boomed since Harold Camping set yesterday as the date of the Rapture. With 259 clients signed up, totaling about \$35,000 in contracts, Earth-Bound is holding out a rescue net for dogs, cats, a cockatoo and even a horse in Montana. To assure that his staff will be left in place to carry out their responsibilities, Centre extracts from his employees confirmation that they are indeed atheists. "That confirms," he assured NPR, "that even in the absurdly remote chance that we are wrong and the believers are right, our rescuers are going nowhere."

We laugh; and over the years, many have had the opportunity to laugh at similar failed prophecies. I recall a pastor from my childhood responding to a similar prediction with the words that although he did not know when Jesus would come, he would not come on the prescribed date, because the Bible says that no one knows the date.

We laugh and if we're honest, probably feel a little bit superior that we do not get trapped in such games. If we look a little deeper, however, there is legitimate reason for concern. We are concerned for those who are caught up in the hysteria, for example, those who quit their jobs or quit making house payments or gave away all their belongings. But we have reason to be concerned as well for those who are callously painted as outside the pale of God's love and mercy. For those who felt like they couldn't trust the reliability of Earth-Bound, Centre tongue-in-cheek suggests that they go out and "find a friend who may be a Jew, a Hindu, a Muslim, an Atheist, a Wiccan, a Catholic, an Episcopal, anyone they think is not going to be Raptured and appoint them as their post-Rapture power of attorney."

All laughter aside, worshiping a God so cut off, so ready to condemn the majority of the human population to hell, is not something I am ready to do. Nor, I fully believe, is it something we are asked to do. Although Scripture has its passages of stern and even violent warning and condemnation, at bottom, it gives witness to a God whose love and mercy are unbound, outstretching anything we have ever before believed.

"Rabbi," John tells us the disciples asked Jesus, "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (9:1) I recall my friend Helen Parks voicing her sense of relief that Jesus responded, "Neither." Born blind, she had known the burden of wrestling with the source of her disability all of her life, and she was relieved to know it was not God's curse upon her.

I recall, too, my own mother, struggling with near blindness and illness in her last years of life, asking me, "Do you think God is doing this to punish me for something?" I, her preacher daughter, responded with every fiber within me, "No!" I would not and I could not serve such a God. The God I knew and know from Scripture and experience is a God of love and mercy.

And yet in our childhood we sang the chorus, "Only believe. Only believe. All things are possible, only believe." Are suffering and illness are not God's curse upon us, are they then an indication of our lack of faith? Are they still our fault?

Matthew tells us that after initiating a ministry of healing and teaching, Jesus went back to his hometown. "And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief" (13:58). First Mark and then the other Gospels seek to distance Jesus from the familiar first century figure of a wonder worker who went around performing spectacular events to win followers. As a matter of fact, when uncomprehending crowds start pressing in to get a piece of the action, the Gospels depict Jesus withdrawing. When out of wild anticipation of plentiful bread and healing, they push to make him king, he again retreats. Jesus' miracles, he seems to be seeking to make clear, are not proofs. They are signs. They point beyond Jesus to God, and they take place in the context of faith.

But what kind of faith? Faith in the sense of wishful thinking so that if we believe hard enough, we will be healed? And failure to be healed is, thus, an indictment of our faith? Or faith in the sense of an orthodoxy that crosses all its "t's" and dots all of its "i's"?

The question of faith, and more than faith, is raised starkly and uncomfortably in the story of Jesus' encounter with a woman from the region of Tyre. Jesus, Matthew says, has withdrawn from Galilee at a moment that may mark a turning point in his ministry. He retreats some 40 or more miles from Capernaum for a period of withdrawal and contemplation, in order to minister to Jewish settlements there, or . . . . We're not quite sure. We do know that the area into which he goes has a reputation. At an early point in his ministry, he has even placed it alongside

Sodom (Mt. 11:21-22). Tyre, a gentile city, known for its economic and political abuse of the surrounding rural Jewish communities, extracted its grain and thus its bread, from Jewish farmers. Building up great storehouses, it continued to flourish in times of crisis while its poor neighbors suffered.

Awareness of the abuse Jews in and around Galilee had suffered at the hands of the people of Tyre helps somewhat in explaining Jesus' harsh rejection of the woman from Tyre seeking healing for her "little daughter". Mark characterizes her as a Hellenist or Greek. Matthew, on the other hand uses an unmistakable epithet, depicting her as a "Canaanite". Canaanites, Israel's ancient enemy dating to the days of the settlement of Palestine, stood for everything despicable. According to the writings of Hebrew Scripture, Israel's goal with respect to the Canaanites was their elimination. Repulsive religious practices, such as idol worship and child sacrifice, were associated with them. Penning such a label on the woman thus recalled ancient history and nationalistic loyalties as well as serving as a reminder of the suffering of poor Jews at the hands of Tyre and Sidon in more recent days. Perhaps, David Garland suggests, Jesus' uncharacteristic harshness toward the woman reflected something other than ethnic prejudice. Perhaps it flowed from familiarity with an unjust situation that prevailed against his own people. Perhaps Jesus merely shared the prejudice of the underprivileged against the privileged who so sorely used them [*Reading Matthew*, 165].

At first ignoring her pleas, Jesus eventually hurls back words that startle our sensitivities and leave us wishing they weren't there. First he assures the disciples that he bears no responsibility toward the woman: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Then he responds to her simple plea for help: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (15:24, 26). Volumes have been written seeking to explain his words. Some point hopefully to the fact that he uses a diminutive word for dog, signifying a small dog, a pet or as one writer puts it, a "dogette." Others say Jesus was only wanting to test his disciples and/or the woman. Others say that the words are inauthentic. Jesus never said them. They were penned by an early Jewish Christian who was opposed to the mission to the gentiles, and only later did someone go back and "correct" the story, adding softening touches and showing Jesus moving to fulfill the woman's request.

The mystery is not solved and our dis-ease with the passage continues. The resolution of the story does, however, say something very important to us. Just as Jesus responded earlier in Capernaum to a Roman centurion who came seeking the healing of his servant, Jesus eventually responds to the Syrophenician woman. Jesus' words to the centurion, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith" (8:10), are not unlike his words to the woman, "Woman, great is your faith!" (15:28). In both instances, the faith to which Jesus responded was not a full blown, orthodox faith. It was not an institutional faith; and it certainly was not a faith that many of the faithful would have then or would now acknowledge. It was, however, a faith that sought out a God of love and mercy. And there is something about that kind of God that is fundamental to Israel's own covenant relationship with God. And there is something about that kind of God that is foundational to the Christian faith. Paul Sherer put it like this:

The thrust of the gospel is forever outward, beyond all its particularity toward the universality of God's redemptive plan. The point is not that 'a Gentile woman, by the exercise of great faith, won for herself the spiritual privileges and blessings which were first proclaimed for Jews'; the point is that the love which is eternally on its way to Calvary—because no matter what happens or doesn't happen, it's always on its way to us—cannot and will not suffer itself to be bound.

--"A Gauntlet with a Gift in It," *Interpretation*, 1966

So what happened at Tyre, and what does it mean for the questions we ask about both about healing and about people of other faiths or no faith? Matthew tells us that Jesus responded and healed the child. As a matter fact, Matthew tells us Jesus cast out the child's demon; but then Matthew goes further. Jesus "left that place" and went up the mountain where the crowds brought to him "the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them." Amazed by all they saw, the crowds, apparently gentiles, "praised the God of Israel" (15:30,31). After three days, Jesus, filled with compassion for them, took bread and after giving thanks, broke it and fed 4000 men, plus the women and children. Seven baskets full of bread remained (15:32-38).

So what happened here? Was the Jesus who had earlier sent out disciples with instructions to "go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10:5-6), converted? True, as was the case with the centurion, he did not go to the woman's home. In both instances, Matthew and Mark say he healed from a distance, perhaps thereby making it easier on Jewish believers struggling with his inclusiveness. Having been so concerned in his conversation with the woman about the adequacy of bread to feed both the children and the dogs that he actually seemed ready to deny bread (healing) to a child, did he learn something new about God's abundant mercy and its unbounded reach?

It makes us nervous to consider such questions, doesn't it? And frankly, we cannot come to conclusions here without some conjecturing that goes beyond what we have in Matthew's account. But this we can know. We can at the very least see here intimations of the amazing outpouring of grace that was to come as barriers broken

down in Jesus' earthly ministry would be multiplied by barriers that have continued to come down in his name through the centuries. And giving ourselves to just such a God of unbounded grace and mercy, we can give ourselves to removing barriers that stand today.

In 2000, Dirk Ficca, then Executive Director of the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions, shared a story learned from Fred Craddock. Near the end of World War II, a missionary was sent to India. Time came for him to return home, and his church wired money for his return. The missionary journeyed to the port city to board a steamer, only to find there European Jews whose ship had briefly docked there in their continuing search to find a country that would accept them. Since it was Christmas, the missionary, to their surprise, sought them out and asked what he could get them for Christmas. Learning of their desire for pastries like the ones they had enjoyed in an earlier life in Germany, he bought and distributed pastries to all he could find. Then he wired home for more passage money.

"What happened to the money we sent you?" his superiors wired back.

"I used it to buy Christmas pastries for some Jews," he responded.

His superiors wired back, "Why did you do that? They don't even believe in Jesus."

"Yes," the missionary responded, "but I do."

And so do I. How about you?