

Anna Gilcher: Deeper into the Dance

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Sermon for Seekers Church

Year A, Proper 15 (RCL)

Genesis 45:1-15

Psalms 133

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15:10-28

Deeper into the Dance

There is an interesting contrast in the two halves of the gospel reading we have this morning. In the first conversation, the Pharisees are upset, scandalized (the Greek verb is *skandalizein*) by the fact that Jesus' disciples aren't washing their hands before eating. They are even more scandalized by what Jesus says when he tells them that what goes *into* people's mouths can't make them unclean, but what comes *out* of their mouths can. In the second conversation Jesus and the disciples have made their way to the district of Tyre and Sidon. It's unclear why they're there, since Jesus had specifically told the disciples earlier to avoid going

among the Gentiles. A Canaanite woman asks repeatedly for help, remaining steadfastly engaged even through his first ignoring her, and then implying that she is a dog-he has been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and you can't take the food meant for the children and give it to dogs (small dogs is the word in Greek, so it may not be quite as bad as it sounds for him to say that, but it's certainly far from flattering). Amazingly *not* scandalized, she accepts his image (at least for the sake of the conversation), answering, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Jesus is moved: "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

In the first conversation the Pharisees are scandalized. In the second, the disciples may be scandalized that Jesus has been publicly convinced by a pagan woman to change his mind. The crowd is probably scandalized, too. But the unnamed woman-who certainly has some reason to be offended-is not.

The Greek *skandalizein* is a word that is rich in meaning and is translated in many different ways in the gospel of Matthew. I am not a Greek linguist or scholar, but according to what I have read, it can mean to be offended, as we have seen, and it can also mean (among other things) to stumble. In fact, according to René Girard, it comes from a verb meaning to limp. Paul Nuechterlein, a Lutheran pastor whose sermons and analyses I often read on the web, sets up faith and this *being scandalized* as polar opposites, and I think he is right on. Indeed, faith suggests wholeness and wellness and flexibility and willingness while *skandalizein*-taking offense and being scandalized and limping and stumbling-suggests being stiff and off-kilter.

(Yet how often do we point to our moral goodness-our faithfulness-by being shocked and offended... scandalized? ...even, perhaps, in this community?)

As most of you know, I spent three days last month doing a spiritual movement/ecstatic dance workshop with Gabrielle Roth and her son Jonathan Horan. One of the exercises we did involved finding a partner who was about our size, making ourselves very stiff, and seeing whether the other person could pick us up. It was not very difficult to do, even for my partner, who had quite a bit of weight to deal with in trying to lift *me* off the ground. We noticed also how easily we could push our partners around, knock them off their center, move them from their spot. Then we did a grounding exercise, helping our partners to breathe deeply and feel roots growing from the bottoms of their feet into the earth. We touched our partners and spoke to them softly, helping them to relax. Then we tried to pick each other up. It was impossible. We were truly rooted, fully grounded. We could no longer be pushed around. We now *stood our ground*.

So if faith is about being whole and well and flexible and willing-while "being scandalized" is being stiff and off-kilter, limping and stumbling-maybe faith has something to do with being grounded and rooted. The Canaanite woman (almost) literally stands her ground with Jesus, kneeling in front of him when he doesn't answer her at first, taking her inspiration from that place of earthiness. I don't have any high opinion of where I belong, I may be a little dog, but I have a place in the household, I have a spot under the table. I will not be kicked away, pushed off-kilter.

In our workshop, we took that sense of groundedness, and began little by little to dance in a grounded way, following our feet... trusting the wisdom of our feet... and allowing the rest of our body to follow. It was radical. (In the most literal sense of the word: rooted.) The energy of the room shifted from somewhat self-conscious (both in the sense of embarrassment and in the sense of "look at me") to deeply conscious. There was great freedom. I found my

body leading me in movements I could not predict, and images of dancing at clubs in college, which had been coming up for me, dissipated as I found myself in that same prayerful space inside me I know well from silence and stillness. I found myself more and more fully present in every space I inhabited.

We did two other exercises that I will describe as well. One was "finding the empty space." As we traveled around the room to the beat of the drum-well over a hundred of us-we practiced trusting our feet to take us to the empty space. If a space any of us was aiming for filled in because someone else stepped into it, that was just fine: that wasn't where I was supposed to go after all. Out of our heads and into our feet. We were becoming flexible and willing... and vibrantly alive.

The second exercise that I will share with you was a practice of dancing with partners. We'd be dancing independently and then Gabrielle or Jonathan would call out "partner," and we would turn and dance with whoever happened to be there. Then, after a few minutes, we would be told to switch, and once again we'd turn and see who was there. It was a powerful exercise in willingness and flexibility... a deep call to relationship. For when we danced together, a new dance was created, with its own rhythms and movements. I was changed by each encounter, challenged to let go of control, to surrender. And then I was challenged to do it again, and again, and again, each time differently, and each time to stay grounded, to stay flexible, to keep breathing, to remain willing. I noticed that if I truly trusted my feet, if I stayed grounded in my movements, that whether I was dancing with myself or with another, freedom came, joy came; I was deeply alive and *it was good*.

I would propose that what Jesus and the Canaanite woman are doing is, in a manner of speaking, dancing together.

They are both willing to dance, and they are both changed by the dance. I would also suggest that the image of following the dance-that is to say, trusting your feet, finding the empty space, and dancing with those who present themselves-is a wonderful, living image for what following call looks like. It's not about setting goals or knowing where we are going. It's about finding the empty space, where our feet lead us. Obstacles are no longer obstacles, they merely help point us toward where it is we *are* being led. We aren't scandalized when someone steps out in front of us, there's enough room for us all.

Jesus knows when this passage begins that he has been called to the lost sheep of Israel. The disciples suggest that he get rid of this woman who's being a nuisance, possibly by just giving her what she wants. Jesus doesn't operate that way, though: he doesn't just give people what they want in order to make them be quiet. He follows call. But call, as we know, is not fixed. We need to be grounded and willing because the dance will shift, and we may be dancing with someone whom we never expected to be dancing with. I think this is what happens to Jesus. Because he is dedicated to following call, because he is grounded in the dance, when he encounters this woman who is herself grounded and flexible and willing, he dances with her and finds himself changed. It is a spectacular image for what faith is all about. Not just the Canaanite woman's faith, by which Jesus is so moved, but Jesus' faith as well. A living, human faith, alive in the dance.

I asked earlier how it was that Jesus came to be in the region of Tyre and Sidon when he had told the disciples to avoid the Gentiles. I think he was following his feet and finding the empty space. And it took him to this encounter, so different from the one with the Pharisees, who are scandalized and offended and stiff and threatened and unwilling.

Here, in this unlikely place, Jesus has met someone who invites him deeper into the dance. Thanks be to

God, he accepts the invitation.

And you?...

Amen.

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