

August 17, 2014 – 20th Sunday of Ordinary Time
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Isaiah 56:1, 6-7; Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8; Romans 11:13-15, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

"...Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish..." Matthew 15:28

I've always liked the story of the Canaanite woman in Chapter 15 of Matthew's gospel, for a couple of reasons. First, because I had a somewhat similar experience shortly after being assigned by Maryknoll to Thailand, and secondly, because it records an instance where Jesus is shown to be just as human as the rest of us – something we sometimes tend to overlook. He felt hunger, thirsted, cried, got angry, so much so that he flipped over tables, and he could be irritated and show impatience. He was after all, a human being. As such, he quite naturally shared the biases and prejudices of his own time and culture.

The story of the Canaanite woman, as Matthew recounts it, is about someone who couldn't take no for an answer, who simply wouldn't shut up – a woman so pushy, that her pestering finally provoked a sharp remark from Jesus: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." How like the rest of us! When we are irritated or pushed too far, our limits, subliminal prejudices kick in, stereotypes, and we find ourselves saying something we later regret or feel ashamed about.

The disciples are unable to get rid of the woman, and neither can Jesus, even with his remark about bread and dogs. The woman persists with a cunning play on words. "Yes, Lord," she responded, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Unexpectedly, Jesus not only answers her plea and heals her daughter but praises her faith: "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." Perhaps it is important to note that the only two people whose faith Jesus singles out for praise are not from among his own faith community. He praises the faith of a Canaanite woman, and that of a Roman centurion— "I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith." I wonder how often we find ourselves praising the faith of a Muslim, a Hindu or a Buddhist.

This gospel passage always brings to mind an experience I had shortly after being assigned to Thailand in early 1990. I was only a month in the country, still in language school, and feeling the pressure at age 50. To relax I'd go out on weekends with my camera.

Near the Maryknoll house there was a small Buddhist monastery. Passing the gate on one of my excursions, I noticed a young monk nursing a baby gibbon with a bottle of milk. Unable to manage more than a greeting in Thai, I gestured that I wanted to take his picture. He smilingly agreed. I had only taken a shot or so when I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to face another monk – "You summons to abbot's quarters," he said, rather sternly. Follow me!

From years of work in the Middle East, I realized that religious etiquette is easily breached; I was already framing an apology as I mounted the stairs to the room where the young abbot was seated cross-legged on a straw mat. I watched the monk prostrate himself three times, but I didn't know enough to do the same – though I had the presence of mind to doff my shoes before entering. "I am just new here," I stammered, hoping he might understand my English if I exaggerated each syllable, and spoke loudly. "And if I offended ..." He cut me off. "I am new here, too," he said softly, "a refugee from Burma." I was surprised at his command of English. A brief exchange, ended with, "It would be nice if you could teach

the monks English." "Yes, well I can't really, at least not right now," I answered smiling and followed suit awkwardly as the monk who had accompanied me prostrated three times and we withdrew.

Two days later I brought the photographs to the monk caring for the gibbon, again only to be interrupted by a tap on my shoulder. "You summons to abbot's quarters." What followed was almost identical to the previous exchange of words, ending with, "It would be nice if you could teach the monks English." "Yes, well I already said I can't," this time said without a smile.

The monks, perhaps, had observed where I lived while on their alms round, for I sometimes sat on the doorsteps with my morning coffee. We were at the supper when another member of the community remarked that a group of Buddhist monks was on the door stoop. I recognized the one who had tapped my shoulder and hastened to the door. "List of students and hours of teaching," he said, handing me a paper. "Oh no," I replied, "You tell the abbot I can't do this. I've got language studies." "You tell him," the monk answered folding the paper, "Come!" "Keep my supper," I said over my shoulder, as I headed out the door in exasperation. This pesky abbot was proving a bit too pushy. My prostrations were curt. "I told you I can't teach the monks English – I'm in language school every day! And besides, you wouldn't want me teaching in your temple – I'm a Catholic missionary brother!" "What has that got to do with it?" he asked slowly. "I didn't ask you to teach us religion – we already have one. You will teach us English." "Why?" I almost shouted. He went on to explain that it would only be for three months, the period of the Buddhist Rain Retreat, the so called Buddhist Lent. "Please." "Okay, an hour and a half a day only," I said breathing out audibly. "Tomorrow. Five o'clock you start." he answered.

I was there the next day just before five to find a monk waiting at the temple gate to lead me up to the awning covered monastery roof where three rows of saffron robed monks were installed on mats along with a white board. No desks! I was to sit on the floor. Worse still, seated in the front row among the beaming young monks sat the young abbot. I raised my eyebrows in disbelief and sighed.

"My name is," as I said, starting to write on the white board ... "Stop!" cried the abbot. My intuition was right: the man was going to be a nuisance. "Now," he intoned, "In your country you had a great Negro leader. . ." I cut him off, "We don't use that word my country," I replied with irritation, "We say, 'African-American.'"

"I don't care what word you use," he replied, bewildered, "I care that he was such a great, great leader. He was a leader from your religion, wasn't he? I read a small book about him in Burma and felt he was a great man. When the uprising took place for democracy, I thought I should try to do the same as him and so I led people from several of our villages in the marches for democracy for a number of weeks. At first we were filled with great hope – I was so happy. And then soldiers came, trucks filled with them and they shot the people in the streets and captured many others and took them away. We were in shock. I tried to keep those I led calm and organize groups to flee to the border. The jungle is thick and it was very difficult. Some were so weak. Five drowned crossing the swollen streams as it was the rainy season. At the border we came under attack by Burmese army soldiers. We lost." He paused in silence. "Oh don't say you lost," I mumbled feeling lost as to what I could say – but he cut me off.

He went on, "Now, in the book I read about the American religious leader it said he sang a song with his people – do you know it?" "Yes," I know it," I said, "We shall overcome." "Then teach it to us," he said softly, "It will be the first English lesson for these young monks. Buddhist monks," he added, "are not allowed by our monks' precepts to sing; but you will teach us this song and we will stand and sing, sing for those who died, and then we will never sing again for the rest of our life." And so it was that I taught

a band of rag-tag, barefoot refugee monks from Burma how to sing “We shall overcome.” I was glad for the cover of nightfall on my way home because I could not hide the emotions on my face.

About three weeks after I started teaching English to the monks, the abbot called me aside after class. “I needed to know I could trust you,” he said, “And I know I can. Come with me.” He took me across the courtyard and opened the door to a large room under the worship hall. By the dim light of bare electric bulbs I made out long lines of people lying on mats with monks bent over them or kneeling to minister to them. “We carried the wounded with us,” he said. They had heard I was a nurse. “Please help us.” He went on to explain, “We are illegal and we are afraid they will put these people back to Burma if we take them to hospitals.” It took me some while to convince that this would not happen, and I was able to the help of some of the monks to get all of the patients attended to by Thai doctors and nurses.

Meanwhile we were busy trying to get UNHCR recognition for the refugees and worked on resettlement, and there were the continual protests and articles against the brutality of the Burmese military dictatorship and the imprisonment of countless political prisoners. The work at times seemed overwhelming and at times I seemed to feel overwhelmed at the terrible injustice that was taking place. The monks always seemed calm and started to invite me to join in the chanting and meditation that took place in the evening before bedtime. It will bring you great inner peace, they assured me, it will teach you to let go. And so it did.

Sometime later newspapers reported that the recipients of the Nobel Peace prize would jointly visited Thailand in support the imprisoned Burmese leader Aung San Su Kyi, who likewise had been award the Nobel Prize. Among them would the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. When the abbot turned up with the clipping from the newspaper I assumed he was going to say something about the Dalai Lama and how a Buddhist monk had been so honored. Instead, he waved the clipping and said, “This leader for freedom, Desmond Tutu, is coming to Thailand. He is from your religion and you will arrange for him to come to our monastery to do a chanting ceremony with us and to pray a blessing for our people in Burma and Africa.” “That’s impossible!” I said. “I don’t even know him. Get the Dalai to come – he’s from your religion.” “No, he said, “I want to pray together with this Christian leader, Desmond Tutu.”

“I don’t think it can be done, but I’ll try.”

I contacted Maryknoll in New York, knowing that Orbis books had had contact with Desmond Tutu. I asked if there was any possible way to contact him to see if he might agree to meet with a Buddhist abbot, a refugee from Burma, who was keen to hold a religious service with him when he came to Bangkok. To my amazement he agreed, asked for a time and requested that he be picked up at the Anglican Church in Bangkok. It was the second time the abbot had me crying, as the two men, though interpreters, spoke for the importance of hope and the conviction that good triumphs over evil and that all people may yet be free. After Buddhist chanting, a Christian blessing, a hug between two men, the abbot and the archbishop walk out of the worship hall hand in hand both beaming from cheek to cheek.

Twenty years later on, I’m still learning from the monks, as I am sure they are from me. I have found Buddhists to be very open to me as a Christian. It is part of Lord Buddha’s teaching: “Do not decry depreciate or condemn the religions of others. Honor whatever in them is worthy of honor. Listen, be curious, be willing to understand the doctrines of others.”

I suspect as a brother missionary, I sort of sensed the moment I walked through the gate of the monastery that I was coming home to brotherhood – monks and brothers have more in common than might be imagined, just as do our Buddhist and Christian faiths.