

Sermon 15 Pentecost B  
September 5, 2021  
CCM

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Good morning again! I trust that you are having a good Labor Day weekend.

Although I am not particularly a fan of the sport, I have come to realize that BOXING is a far more sophisticated sport than meets the eye. This was brought to my attention some years ago while watching a documentary about the champion boxer, Manny Pacquiao, a world champion professional boxer. The filming was done while he was preparing for a title bout against the undefeated fighter, Floyd Mayweather Jr. The documentary focused on all that goes into preparing for such a match and I was struck by the approach that Pacquiao's trainer, Freddy Roach, took in preparing for the fight. You see, he brought in two different sparring partners in order to better prepare Pacquiao for the fight. One was a boxer who had a very strong right hand and was able to throw it in quick succession, as was also the case with Floyd Mayweather. The other was very quick and whose style was to chase his opponent around the ring, again just like Mayweather. Of course, the idea was to expose Pacquiao to Mayweather's greatest strengths over a period time so that he would, of course, be best prepared to enter the ring.

Pacquiao did lose that match to Floyd Mayweather Jr., but there was something about the lessons of the documentary that actually reminded me of the Christian faith and life. Let me try to explain what I mean.

For instance, have you ever heard the old expression, "Steel sharpens steel?" Do you know where it comes from? It is found in the Book of Proverbs, chapter 27:17: "Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another." In other words, there is good when two people enter into honest and open-minded discussion with each other. There is the opportunity to learn and grow beyond the opinions we already hold.

And actually, there had been a long standing tradition in Judaism of rabbis sparring with other rabbis, and rabbinical schools sparring with other rabbinical schools, over the interpretation of the Law and the scriptures long before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

Add to this the fact that, in Mark's Gospel account Jesus himself was called "Rabbi" by many he met along the way.

This is all a means of introducing us to this morning's passage from Mark, one of the most challenging and curious passages in all of the New Testament. Yes, Jesus is tired and is seeking some respite. But the fact is that, on the face of it, he appears to be downright rude to this woman of Syrophenician origin, not an attitude we usually associate with God's son. She knows that he is a healer and she has a daughter who has "an unclean spirit." At the heart of this story is the love a mother has for her child and nothing is going to stop her from seeking the help she needs.

There is more. First, she is a gentile, and Jews and Gentiles had centuries of bad blood between them. Secondly, she is a woman, and in that patriarchal day and age, she had little to no standing and her hopes and opinions did not matter. The bottom line is that she should not be interrupting Jesus in that moment. And he lets her know that. After requesting his help, Jesus responds, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

Ouch. There's not much compassion there, not even when some commentators try to turn the Aramaic word, "dog", into an affectionate diminutive. It is a straightforward rabbinical statement: I am here first and foremost to save my people and you're not one of them.

But remember that iron sharpens iron. In one of the most intelligent, quick-witted, and classic responses in all of the Bible, the woman says to him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." The momentary silence in that room must have been deafening. Yes, Jesus is fully divine. But we get the definite impression that Jesus is also fully human and in this exchange Jesus has learned something that he was not clear about before. Yes, he is the Messiah, sent by God to save Israel. But his Father's infinite love and compassion are not reserved for Israel alone. "Then he said to her, 'For saying that you may go - the demon has left your daughter.'"

You know, there are scholars who argue that the placement of the following healing miracle about the man who is both deaf and blind, is really more about Jesus' heart and mind being opened by his Father than it is about the man who was healed.

Is it possible that God invites us to spar with Him in our daily thoughts and prayers? Are we allowed to ask questions, express doubt, argue, get angry, and even at times show a little irreverence when talking with God's Son? I believe that the answer is "Yes!" We don't need to fear that we will offend God. And yes, I do believe that God will have the final word! But this is how we too, in opening ourselves entirely to the One who loved us first, will receive insight, inspiration, understanding, and blessing,

even if in the end we don't get the answers we had hoped for. There is a term for this kind of sparring with God. It's called, "FAITH."

In sparring with Jesus, this woman was, in fact, serving as steel that sharpens steel. As on scholar has written, "Her wit, her sharp retort, was indeed a gift to Jesus – a gift that enabled his gift of healing in turn, her ministry that opened up the possibility of his." In other words, the transcendent God has invited each one of us into a relationship of mutuality so that we might learn from one another. Imagine that!

You see, God invites us to spar with Him each and every day of our lives, bringing with us our hopes and our fears, our questions and our doubts, our joys and our frustrations. I encourage you to climb into the ring with God this morning and give it a go.

Amen.