

An unusually bright young man worked in the produce department of a supermarket. A woman came in and wanted to buy half a grapefruit. He said that he wasn't sure he could sell half a grapefruit, but he would ask the manager. He went to the manager and said, "You won't believe this, but there is some crazy woman out there who wants to buy half a grapefruit." Just then he glanced around to see that the woman had followed him and was standing right there; so he quickly added, "And this lovely lady wants to buy the other half."

Later the manager said, "Young man, I'm impressed. Where do you come from?" He replied, "Syracuse, New York---home of great basketball teams and ugly women." "Young man," said the manager, "My wife is from Syracuse." And the young man said, "What team did she play on?"

Obviously, this young man was skilled at adapting his frame of reference. Because his basic attitude toward questions and problems was positive, he could maintain an open, receptive stance that allowed him to adjust his reference point. You might say he was artificially intelligent.

The gospel for today appears to be artificially intelligent. I'm not talking about AI, though artificial intelligence seems a non sequitur, a sequence that doesn't logically follow. Isn't intelligence grounded, not artificial? In any case, who in their right mind would cut off their hand or foot or tear out their eye because they stumbled? Who would think Jesus' admonitions made sense? Perhaps it would be helpful to place this story in the perspective in which it was uttered.

Today's gospel reading is a very tough segment of a larger story. We'd like to gloss over it or focus on what we think are sweet reliefs: outsiders whose ministry like those cited as casting out demons in Jesus' name is acceptable, child-like innocence, cups of water offered to the needy. But that's not the point the author of this story is making. Such a perspective is too small. Let's draw back and cast a wider net.

Jesus has left the cool waters of the Galilee and its flowering fields to travel northwest on dusty roads. Out on the far edges of Israel. Out there---figuratively and literally---on the border. "On the boundary between the old and the new, between male and female, between Jew and Gentile, between friend and enemy, between the holy and the demonic."¹ He is coming to the edge of human understanding before returning to Galilee by way of Tyre and Sidon toward Jerusalem and the divine understanding that is coming.

He has journeyed to the northernmost outskirts of His ministry, to the region of the fortified island city of Tyre. You may have seen the picture in the *New York Times* Tuesday of people fleeing along the beach in Tyre, Lebanon to escape bombardment from our modern malestrom. As a Phoenician center of sea power, Tyre had long supported mainland dominions and an interest in overland trade routes which made it so wealthy that its king supplied Solomon with timber for the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, the proverbial cedars of Lebanon. The

¹ Thomas G. Long, "Matthew," (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987), 174.

Tyrians were more cosmopolitan than the neighboring Sidonians and in religious matters drew from the best in various doctrines, so it is no surprise that the Syrophenician woman of an earlier episode was open to the ministry of Jesus. She was a pagan, inclusive of a multitude of religious beliefs; and she seems to have had insight about the Jewish man she confronted. Is it possible that she saw beyond the necessary to the possible, beyond the finite to the infinite? Did she know something the people around Jesus did not know?

In any case, as Jesus leaves that area and heads southeast toward Jerusalem, He is approaching the fulcrum of His story, the turning point when He sets His face toward the cross. He is coming to the point where He settles the confrontation between His human nature and His divine nature, to the dead center of the gospel when He asks “Who do you say that I am?” Yes, there are short episodes of healing that follow, but Jesus is not presented as the answer to all the dualities life presents: who is right and who is wrong, who is good versus who is bad, who is smart and who is stupid. Rather than being the answer, Jesus is the question. How do sentient human beings rise above the terrible fray of our age to find a third way to look at our controversies? Jesus is the question who thrusts our questions into a whole different dimension.

What are the dimensions of the question of Jesus? What are the dimensions of God? The Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann often warns the faithful that we domesticate God, that we fail to appreciate the majesty of God when we reduce Him to sweetness and light to fit our so-called intelligence. For God is fierce and irascible, fiery, passionate, vehement, towering, explosive, forceful as in Job when He thunders from the tempest, “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations? Tell me, since you are so well-informed....Have you ever in your life given orders to the morning or sent the dawn to its post, telling it to grasp the earth by its edges and shake the wicked out of it....Have you journeyed all the way to the sources of the sea, or walked where the Abyss is deepest? Have you been shown the gates of Death....Have you an inkling of the extent of the earth? Tell me all about it if you have!”²

In the same vein, Jesus blasts out, “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. [Likewise] if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off....And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.” He is not just warning us to beware stumbling, as if we were to stub our toe. The word translated “stumble” is too tame. The word Jesus uses in Greek is far more forceful. It is *skandalizo*, scandalize as in shock. Yes, Jesus is trying to shock some sense into us, saying, “Your perception of God and God’s dream for this earth is too small.” God has greater things in store.

The stories Jesus enacted were simple: They were short. And yet, there was something about the words He selected to tell His stories, the arrangement of those words in haunting phrases, and the use of the phrases to give the words new meaning that was compelling. His skill at illustration was marked by a power that was irresistible. With a quick comparison, a brief

² Job 38, *passim*

association---like the tension between the old social order in which they were living that equated outsiders with suspect immigrants and the new society they sought that granted mercy to all God's creation---He brought His hearers up short. He captured the imagination of His listeners and drew them into the story itself. He changed what was commonly accepted into a new intelligence.

His gift was unusual. It was unique. And that facility for drawing His listeners into the perspective He depicted was perhaps the single most distinctive characteristic of His gift. For it was not heroic poetry He recited, epic tradition He recounted, or classical history He related. No, this master story teller talked about the elements of common, everyday reality; but the way He talked about that reality compelled His audience to respond. Jesus caused His audience to participate in His tale with anticipation while He described plots in terms of universally experienced reality. He caused His listeners to recognize the episodes of the plot as their own stories, past, present, and future because He reviewed settings in terms of recurring circumstances in the lives of His listeners. But He filled them with something new. He forced His hearers to identify with the characters of His stories while He developed parts in terms of daily human affairs that became divine interludes. He did so in such a way that His listeners were YANKED from passive hearing to active participation in the drama of the story. The identity of His listeners was engaged, and the minds of those who heard were wrenched from the expectation of omens to the reality of life's battleground, from passive reception of manna to active grasping of flesh and blood reality. The stories of this master did not merely provide information. They called forth experience and demanded response.

The role of this man was not only dramatist but actor. His appeal to His audience was an invitation to join Him in the action---not just passively receive. His entreaty to His listeners was to turn from mere observation of the story to actively draw from it and seek one's part. He differed from the dramatists who followed Him---like Shakespeare, Moliere, Tennessee Williams---because His purpose was not to inform the intelligence of His listener. His purpose was to impel the whole person to feel and to act. He was not so much a teacher as the leader of a demonstration. And He, in His turn, demonstrated in His life what He put forward with His words.

He is not asking us to maim ourselves. He is asking us to equip ourselves for a battle of the greatest consequence, not our artificial intelligence but our dedication to the scandal of devotion. He wants God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. He wants God's dream to become our reality. So be it.

(The Rev.) Judith M. McDaniel, Ph.D.