

Mathew 15:21-28 Saturday August 19, 2017

These days, we speak of a global economy, global corporations and global networks. We hope for global understanding and peace. Such a global perspective is important because we are all connected. What happens in the oil fields of the Mideast does affect people around the world. A tropical storm off the coast of Africa in August can develop into the hurricane that day's later hits the coast of Florida.

What does this have to do with our reading from Matthew 15? Simply put: God is also global. As straightforward as this sounds, it isn't always easy to remember. When we are focused on our own lives and our own little corner of the world, we lose sight of this larger reality. We start thinking that God cares more about us than for people far away. We can begin making distinctions among people-distinctions that judge and divide. We think about those people who speak differently, eat differently, dress differently, and worship differently from us.

Jesus and his disciples find themselves in a very different territory one day-Gentile territory, far from home. A Canaanite woman begs for her daughter to be healed. She is not a Jew and has no right to ask Jesus for anything. Also, as a woman it is socially unacceptable for her to even speak to Jesus or approach him, yet she kneels before him and even dares to debate with him. The disciples want to send her away, but she won't be put off. When she kneels before Jesus, even his answer to her plea is abrupt and dismissive. Scholars debate why Jesus responded this way. Some think that it might have been Jesus' way of heightening the tension in the encounter so that an important point could be made even more forcefully. In spite of Jesus' curt reply, the woman presses

on. Her answer to Jesus opens up the discussion. Jesus' answer to her goes even further" Woman, great is your faith!" It doesn't matter that this mother is a foreigner and unacceptable as both a Gentile and a woman. What matters is that her daughter is in great need and she has turned to Jesus for help.

We don't know what the disciples thought next. If it was anything like what the Pharisees thought about Jesus' teaching about the tradition of the elders they had to be at least surprised if not disapproving. Just before the encounter with the Canaanite woman, the Pharisees had criticized Jesus for letting his disciples eat with unwashed hands. Not that their hands were unwashed but they were not washed in the ritual way of hand washing. The Pharisees have the tradition of the elders on their side. But Jesus sees through their hypocrisy and will not let them use the tradition to condemn and exclude others. Jesus has come with a word of grace, calling for faith. He has not come to uphold every law and tradition that ends up excluding people from God's family. Even though this offends the Pharisees, Jesus' approach is not as new as it might have seemed that day.

The other readings that accompany today Gospel also point to a global God. The prophet, Isaiah, speaks of God gathering others in addition to the outcasts of Israel; the foreigners who join themselves to Israel. Psalm 67 speaks of God's ways coming to "all nations." In Romans Paul writes that God has imprisoned all in disobediences so the "he may be merciful to all." God's vision, especially through Jesus Christ, is much larger than any human vision. God is a global God.

Yes, God is a global God. This is very good news. God loves this world, and it is God's design to hold us together in Christ. God will gather all

sorts of people together in Jesus Christ, including those who are different from us. This is good news to remember when we read our newspapers or listen to the nightly news report. All too often, leaders try to demonize their opponents or people in another country. This is good news to remember when we relate to our close neighbors-the grump down the block, the jerk at work and even those who would be enemies. God is their God, too.

Another way to visualize our global God is to think of God as the one who has created, or planted, everything. Biblical writers give us the image of a tree. God is like the root system. God's love is the support system for all that there is. Life springs from God, like the trunk and branches of a tree. The trunk of the tree springs from God's action. It is the forgiveness and new life we receive by the grace of God, especially in Jesus Christ. Then, the branches and leaves are all who grow from this grace of God, all who respond in faith and are nourished by the love and grace of God.

Now we can picture the branches and even name them. If we were to do this today, what names, like leaves on a branch would we hang from each branch? Based on our Gospel reading we could hang leaves reading: the Canaanite woman and her daughter, the disciples and all who have faith in Jesus that day. Based on what we read in the Bible, we could hang other leaves that read: Israel, all foreigners who attach themselves to God, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, and men and women. Today, what leaves might you and I also hang on the tree? How about Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Congregationalists and many more? Where would we hang leaves reading Muslim and Buddhist? All of us grow out of God's

love, even though we are very different from one another in belief, background and practice.

This is good news. God doesn't write anyone off. God is ready to show mercy to all who call upon God's name. Thanks be to God. Amen