

“A Bold Spirit”

Matthew 15:21-28

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August 20, 2017

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I am often asked to name people who have inspired me, influenced me in some way. I usually name people like Jim Kinne who ran the corner store across the street and loved every child who entered his shop, or Dick Bowler who gave me my first tennis lesson, or Eddie O’Neal my preaching professor at Andover Newton. This week, I am adding to my list the Canaanite woman who came to Jesus for help with her daughter who was ill. This woman, this mother, this Canaanite outsider has a bold spirit. She is not easily intimidated. Not easily dissuaded. She loves her daughter so much she won’t take ‘no’ for an answer, not even from Jesus. This woman has ‘chutzpah.’

Initially rebuffed by Jesus, she speaks to him with a surprisingly bold spirit, “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” He is stunned by her bold spirit. He is moved by her faith. Indeed, she, a Canaanite outsider, has demonstrated greater faith than the population of insiders with whom he’s been spending time. I like this woman! She inspires me. She is my teacher. She reminds me that we all have within us a bold spirit, a spirit that is awakened when love is what’s needed.

I witnessed this bold spirit come alive last week with two of our granddaughters, Corinna and Nina. The three of us were at the beach in Virginia hunting for shells they might turn into jewelry. Armed with buckets and shovels, we combed the beach at low tide. It was I who found an astoundingly beautiful conch-type shell, several inches long, multi-colored, intriguing in every way. The girls were fascinated with this treasure.

We spent the next hour imagining it as a necklace or a center piece or a desk ornament. We put it up to our ears and listened to the roar of the ocean. THEN, from inside the shell, two legs appeared! Then a muscular-looking body appeared. It was alive! **That's when the bold spirit awakened.** "Grandpa," they said, we have to return this shell to the ocean. It will live better there." I was simply blown away by their compassion for life. Seeing there was life in that shell, they no longer thought of it as an article for adornment. It was no longer just a shell; it was a living, breathing creature that deserved to live! I didn't know a crab could be so loved! Corinna and Nina have a bold spirit. I saw it awakened when life was in the balance.

I believe Matthew included this story of the Canaanite woman because he wanted his own church to claim the bold spirit that God had given it. If the church were to survive and thrive, it would have to exercise a bold voice and a bold witness. It could not be timid about its faith or its hope. The faith of that earliest church was centered in the Resurrection, in the belief that God raised Jesus from the dead, and that with God's grace all things are possible. Broken lives can be mended. Broken relationships can be healed. Broken communities can be reconciled. Matthew lifts up the Canaanite woman as a symbol of the bold spirit that is needed. She is motivated by love. When love is the motivator, peace has a chance. When love is the motivator, justice prevails. When love is the motivator, the church is a light which can not be extinguished.

South Congregational Church has been richly blessed with a bold spirit. The evidence abounds. You heard the cry of Haitian refugees living in the Dominican Republic and you said, "Let's go there and bring some hope." You heard the cry of Syrian refugees, and you said, "Let's open our hearts to one of these families." You heard the cry of Malawian orphans, and you said, "Let's build another house on the campus of the St. Mary's Orphanage."

You heard the cry of local Glastonbury children heading off to school with no pencils or paper or school supplies, and you said, “Let’s provide backpacks with markers and notebooks and Hostess Twinkies.” You heard the cry of men and women in the military, and you said, “Let us light a prayer candle every Sunday in worship.” You heard the cry of homeless folks living at the South Park Inn, and you prepared meals with real baked potatoes!”

I thank God for you all the time! For I know you are motivated by love. It’s love that awakens your bold spirits. It’s love that makes you persistent. It’s love that chases fear away. It’s love that allows this church to thrive.

The story we heard from Genesis illustrates the power of a bold spirit to reconcile brokenness. Joseph had been sold into slavery by his jealous older brothers. He had been sold and taken down to Egypt where he ended up in jail, but eventually became the Minister of Agriculture serving in Pharaoh’s court. Years pass. The brothers live with their guilt in selling their youngest brother into slavery. Joseph longs to be reunited with his family. By an act of Providence, the opportunity for reconciliation presents itself. The brothers come down to Egypt to buy food because there has been a famine in their homeland. Joseph is in charge of the Egyptian granaries. He recognizes his brothers. He could easily have blown them off, ignored them, sent them away hungry.

But there is a bold spirit awakened within him. He loves his brothers. Though they had treated him with an unspeakable violence, selling him into slavery, he loves them still. It is this love that gives birth to a bold spirit, that lets him confront them saying, “I am your brother. With God, all things are possible.”

It’s a precious story. Like the story of the Canaanite woman, it’s a story for today. For in our world, there is a brokenness. It is a brokenness that we see and that we can not ignore.

It is a brokenness that awaits a bold spirit, a spirit born in love, a spirit that believes in the Resurrection, and believes all things fall into the realm of possibility when the name of God is invoked.

I began this sermon naming Jim Kinne and Dick Bowler and Eddie O'Neal. Today, I add to this list of inspiring souls the Canaanite mother and Joseph the son of Jacob and Rachel. As I add names to my list, I realize I am living in the greatest of hope. Amen.