

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: September 5, 2021

“Syrophoenician woman *midrash*”

*Rev. Dr. Lois Williams/Rev. Melissa Langdon*

Good morning and happy Labor Day weekend. We have some pretty amazing readings today that are straight forward about the way we should act and treat people. Today’s readings challenge us to live up to our baptismal vows of recognizing everyone as a child of God and treating each person as such.

Normally I sit down and write for you a pretty individualized sermon. However, I spent some time this week with colleagues and I must admit I was taken in by the material shared by Reverend Melissa Langdon. I went to school with Melissa and she now serves at All Santos in Oxnard.

What Rev. Melissa has done is a modern *midrash* on the Syrophoenician woman. *Midrash* is an old Jewish tradition of fleshing out interesting scriptural characters and giving them a full voice for a deeper understanding of the story. So, without much more to say, I give you Rev. Melissa’s *midrash*.

*I am a Syrophoenician woman. I do not think I would have believed in the teacher if it had been any other way. You see, I am a proud woman. My family comes from Tyre many generations hence. And while I could not go myself, I benefited from the tutors from all around the Greek speaking world who came to our house to teach my brothers. My family members are leaders in our community, and I speak not only Greek but some Latin and other languages of educated people. My family is a proud family. But that day I was not proud. I was only a mother worried about her child.*

*You see, my daughter from two weeks hence had not been herself. Sometimes in fits, sometimes in a fever, and sometimes as if she was someone else, and all of it I knew was taking something out of her. I could not stand to see it. I sent for our family physician. He could not do a thing. He told me to get ready for the worst. No, I could not accept that. So I reached out to my other relatives in nearby towns, sending boys to run as fast as possible and another physician came, and another and she only got worse, never better. That morning when I awoke I went to feed her and she would not take a thing, and she was drawn. I was so worried that next I would be burying my beloved daughter.*

*I set myself near my door and took in the morning sunshine, wondering what to do, how to save my beloved daughter. I did not know a lot about faith, but I had a friend who talked about the God of the Hebrews and she was fascinated with the stories she had heard. And I began to say, God, if you are there, lead me to someone who can help my daughter. And just then, a friend walked past and told me about a certain rabbi who was at Eudocia's house and how there were stories about him, stories about healing. At that moment, I knew what to do. I had to see that rabbi.*

*So I put on my visiting clothes, nothing too fancy as I did not wish to impress him, just to ask for help. And I walked over to Eudocia's house. And there he was, sitting in a corner. I asked someone to be sure, but something in me knew even before I asked. And all the years of pride drained out of me. And I just fell to my knees and asked, begged him to heal my daughter.*

*Now, I was a bit shocked because he responded that he needed to feed the children before the dogs. And then all of a sudden my mind went back to a moment in the market talking to my friend Elissa. We had seen a beggar, an out-of-towner sitting by the temple gate that is near the meat stall. I said I*

would not be giving him any money as I needed to feed my children before I fed the dogs! It was not my nicest moment. Yes, I must have seemed a lady who thought too much of herself when I said that. And looking around, I caught the eyes, ever so briefly, of a man. And here was that man in front of me. Using my very own words to challenge me, to challenge my pride!

All my pride bubbled up and almost brimmed over. How dare he talk to me like that? What kind of family could he possibly come from that he could talk to an educated Greek speaking lady like me, a mother and a sister and a daughter of influential people in my community that way? But then I caught the twinkle in his eye. He wanted to see, you see, how I would respond. Would I fly off the handle like any common person? Would I be humbled enough to think more carefully about what I said and did?

Well, it took me a minute, but I responded, "Sir, even the dogs can eat the crumbs from the table of their Master." It sounded very humble. But I will tell you at that moment, I felt BOLD. Bold because I was saying it was not about Jews and Greeks, and he knew it. It was about people. God and people. And his healing could cover us all.

And wow, was he surprised then. You could see from the intelligence of those eyes that nothing much surprised him. So I must admit I felt a little bit proud that I had challenged this teacher at his own game. But all of a sudden none of that mattered, because he said, "for saying that, your daughter is healed." Alleluia! I had never felt such relief. I could hardly thank him quickly enough but did remember my manners sufficiently to invite him to dine at our house if he had the chance before he left town. I fled home and oh- what joy! I found my daughter well again. Everything was restored. Proud though

*I am, I wept for joy. I didn't care if the servants saw. Besides, I needed to learn more about this man, this rabbi and his God.*

I hope you enjoyed this mini *midrash* and hope it encourages you to find the hidden voices of scripture as you read and see where you fit into the story. This is a weekend when we celebrate the ordinary worker, the essential worker, often those that do not have a voice.

We are called by our faith to lift up those voices that often go unheard. I encourage you to “open” your ears and mouth to give a fuller voice to our scriptures and invite you to a fuller understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Happy Labor Day weekend. Amen