

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
August 16, 2020
Preached via Zoom during COVID

Just south of the arctic circle sits the small town of Nome, Alaska. In 1925 during a diphtheria outbreak, Dr. Curtis Welch realized that the entire batch of the hospital's diphtheria antitoxin serum had expired, and this caused him to send an urgent request to the government for more serum. The catch? The coastal town of Nome had already become iced in for the winter and the only way for the serum to get to Nome was by dogsled. The trip was over one thousand miles. The story of the dog mushers and the heroic canines captured the imagination of the people all over the United States, and the progress of the serum to Nome took up portions of the radio news each night all over the country. Even now, there are statues to the heroic dogs all over the country, including Central Park in New York City.

Every year to commemorate the serum run, dog mushers from all over the world come to Alaska to recreate the race from Anchorage to Nome in an event called the Iditarod. When I was little it was a pretty big deal each year — watching the beginning of the race and then hearing who was in first place and who was likely to get to Nome first. Most people race huskies, but I do remember a fellow who raced standard poodles one year.

It's a pretty male-dominated sport, but in 1985, for the first time, a female dog musher by the name of Libby Riddles won the race. The story goes that several mushers were hunkering down together in the arctic while a blizzard blew through. The dogs would settle down in little balls amidst the snow for warmth while the mushers would wait out the worst of it on their sleds. Still, it IS a race, and sometimes people take risks. Libby Riddles decided not to wait until the storm abated and went out in the worst of it. And she ended up winning the race.

Some people applauded her courage, while others criticized what they saw as foolhardy risks for both her and her dogs. History doesn't remember the controversy. They mostly remember that in 1985, Libby and her dogs became Alaska legends.

I was thinking about the audacity of Libby Riddles when I read the Gospel story this morning. In it, a Canaanite woman pleads with Jesus to heal her daughter who is being tormented by a demon. The disciples act like bouncers at an exclusive club, trying to keep curtail her access to Jesus. And for a minute it works. Even Jesus is not terribly interested in helping at first. And then, in a remarkable turnaround, the Canaanite woman persists and is eventually rewarded for her faith and her tenacity. The demon-possessed daughter is healed.

There's a old trope that in Sunday school, the answer to every question is "Jesus!" But in this story, Jesus doesn't come off looking that great. At first, he seems pretty convinced that the Canaanite woman is too much of an outsider to warrant his particular help.

And she persists. She knew that she needed the blessing of this teacher from Nazareth.

What are we to make of that? What are we to make of her bravery? Was she reckless to go out into the storm alone? Was she bold and fearless? And what is a Christian person supposed to make of this story. Are we supposed to be in the business of pestering God?

The model of spirituality that I'm probably most comfortable with is deeply passive. Some traditions talk about emptying oneself of the ego or being of the same mind as God. The Canaanite woman offers a different model that I find myself having to wrestle with. What is it like to be in a robust argument with God? What is it like to be bold in front of God, asking for the needs of your family, your community, and yourself?

I will admit that the idea of it makes me uncomfortable, but it seems to me that this boldness is precisely what the story is pointing to. She was bold in her prayer to God. And God in the person of Jesus was moved by her pleas.

I think what I take away from this episode is that the woman and Jesus were in a dynamic relationship. God wasn't some clockmaker way up in heaven, and the woman wasn't some passive player just observing her own life. Instead she was in a conversation with God that ended up blessing her life and, at the risk of being a heretic, it seemed to bless God as well. Jesus and the woman really saw one another and ended up making something pretty amazing happen.

We don't talk a lot about demon possession — we are far too sophisticated for that. But when I look around at some of the ills in our society, it seems to me that demon possession is about as good an explanation as any. So why not come to Jesus and ask for healing. Last week we talked about Jesus always coming to us on the water. Jesus came to heal this woman and her daughter as well, but it just took him a minute. He needed her nudge.

Martin Luther said, sin boldly but have faith more boldly still. And I guess I would add to that — pray boldly. Tell God what it is that this crazy world needs right now. Get on your sled in the storm and boldly go out into the unknown. If the Canaanite woman is to be believed, there will be healing on the other side of our boldness. Who knows, if we begin to pray boldly, maybe we will just start to act boldly. And if all the people of faith and goodwill in this world were to act boldly, I imagine we really could bring about the healing of the nations. Amen.