

“The Allusive Power of The Word”
 Pastor Sam Richards
 Sermon for 29 January 2023
 Texts: Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30

I want to preach today on the “allusive power” of God’s Word by which I mean the idea that out of our familiarity with Scripture, even taking in weakness of memory and faulty recollection, an allusion to Scripture has evocative power. It summons forth truth by association, it ignites transferability and, even if seemingly intuitive, some connection is made between texts, between a portion of the script and other significant parts. For example, in my work with Shakespeare, certain plot lines emerge as if it were rooted in Scriptural incidences—which manifest themselves, freshly, or currently, in dramatic predicaments in a play that, as a result of allusion, tantalize us with their familiarity.

Here is an example. Amnon made himself sick with lustful infatuation directed towards his lovely half-sister, Tamar, a daughter of David by another wife. Eventually, he corners and takes advantage of her. This is technically an incestual rape. Tamar, who actually liked Amnon before this violation urges him to consummate the act with marriage to which she claims King David, their father, would accede the blood relation being somewhat removed. She is responding naturally, and appropriately to sexual intimacy but Amnon instead of respecting, honoring and loving her—abhors and detests her and looks for ways to dispose of her now that he has used her. This incident, given David’s own sexual dysfunction (lusting and violating Bathsheba) is not surprising. And his failure to advocate for Tamar is such a dereliction of fatherly duty that the whole Amnon/Tamar interaction is sad, tragic. *Now that story-line is familiar with those who know their bible—as would be the rape of Dinah, the fornication based fertility cults in which Dinah’s brothers appear to have been ensnared and the fundamental lust problem that Jacob had with Rachel.* Biblical Christians would “know” this, if not by chapter, line and verse, subliminally—it would be part of their awareness. And that level of familiarity, or of knowing is what the allusive power of the Word is based on. The story-line of Helena, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, tracks with this. Demetrius induces Helena into sexual intimacy. They make love and Demetrius tries to dismiss the incident as a “friends with benefits” kind of moment. She, being bonded to him through that intimacy, is not on the same page: she dotes in extremity, even idolatry upon her lover. One of the main tensions in the play is this tension between “free love” so to speak and “marital bonding” which young lovers are actually designed for. Sexual intimacy is not about self-pleasuring, nor even about pleasuring the other. Sex is a dangerous sedative, that is, a dangerous painkiller and cure for boredom. All of which destroys the personhood of those involved. The beauty of this play is that it allows the audience to explore such sensitive topics vicariously, or at arm’s length.

Several other themes are introduced that support this interpretation which keeps sex within the bounds of marriage. Hermia, the other female lead in the pairs of lovers, explains what the “yes” is a woman’s acceptance of a proposal of marriage entails. She says, “So will I live, so die, my lord./Ere I will yield my virgin patent up/Unto his lordship whose unwished yoke/My soul consents not to give sovereignty.” (1:1:ll 81-84) A “yes” is a yielding up of a woman’s entitlement to live as a virgin. And it is an act of voluntary submission, to the headship of a prospective husband, someone who is willing to serve, protect, love and provide for her and their offspring in the marriage covenant. At least that is what Christian

marriage entails between husband and wife. That is a weighty consideration stimulated by allusion to the Word as found in Ephesians 5:22-33—which everyone in Shakespeare’s audience, having attended a marriage ceremony, would undoubtedly have been familiar with!

The more difficult meaning floated out there is the *defilement* which attends the sexual immorality Helena and Demetrius engaged in. Yes, this may help explain Amnon’s disgust with Tamar after he used her; but it in no way justifies him, or his callous act. Significantly, Demetrius and Amnon act as if they are oblivious to the transgressions they have committed, Amnon never confesses, or repents and dies unforgiven. Demetrius is more fortunately rescued from himself—and that through the repentance of Oberon who relates Titania from the “punishments of infatuation.” The torments of Amnon (infatuation) aligns with the torments of the lover pairs and all align with the torments of Titania who, like Oberon is guilty of many trysts and infidelities. However, and this is quite telling, Amnon, stricken with guilt projects his defilement onto Tamar as Demetrius does on Helena—but she, being far more grounded and sensible in the aftermath of sin rebukes the callow fellow, who dares to taunt her about the virginity which he had stolen!

Ay, in the temple, in the town, the field

You do me mischief. Fie, Demetrius!

Your wrongs do set a scandal on my sex. (3:1: ll. 245-246)

Thus she calls him out (as a man) and elicits the help of Oberon—who, in the midst of heaping scorn on his wife(!) has yet to awaken to his own guilt and responsibility.

Such is the wonderful opportunity I have to discuss such enormously spiritual issues with the SMASH actors and, hopefully, with those who come to see and hear it.

The power of allusion. Notice how Shakespeare allows us through his art to observe such matters, each on his own level of awareness! So let’s dig a little deeper, shall we. Helena has an exchange with Demetrius prior to her calling him out for his mischief—a euphemism for his egregious sin what he neither acknowledges, nor owns early in the play..

Demetrius:

Do I entice you? Do I speak you fair (civilly)?

Or rather do I not in plainest truth

Tell you I do not (more) I cannot love you?

Helena:

And even for that do I love thee more.

I am your spaniel, and, Demetrius,

The more you beat me I will fawn on you.

Yes me but as your spaniel: spurn me, strike me,

Neglect me, lose me, only give me leave

(Unworthy as I am) to follow you.

What worser place can I beg in your love

(And yet a place of high respect with me)

Than to be used as you use your dog.

Allusion opens the portal to an amazing parallel, to the compelling and enticing story of the Syrophoenician (or Canaanite) woman, so fixed in the mind and memory of the audience that creative application cannot be denied. First, “Do I speak thee fair? Or do I address you

civilly? Did Jesus address this woman civilly? A goodly number think not so. Is it civil to designate someone “a dog?” Now common usage in Jesus’ day prevents us from taking this label as offensively as we would do. It was not so derogatory. But, there’s a start. The woman embraces the designation without shame. It’s quite humble and brilliant of her to do so. And here’s what else. In Matt. 15:27 the word used for dogs denotes puppies (little dogs) and it was customary to care for, “feed under the table,” so to speak, the puppies. When dogs were grown, they were pretty much on their own: to range and scavenge for food. She doesn’t say, “Treat me like a dog” she actually says, “Treat me as a puppy entitled to your affectionate care and provision, LORD.”

There’s two things: a greater civility than we might suppose and the customary treatment of puppies which we may not have ciphered into the exchange. Let’s zoom out and take a wider view. This woman presents herself as largely faithful: She calls Jesus “Lord,” perhaps the first of 133 times in the Gospels. She acknowledges him to the messianic seed of David (Matt. 15:22) which means that the loaves of bread on the table for the kingdom family of God, and the crumbs under the table were actually “messianic blessings” symbolized as food and scraps. Her faith, mentioned in Matthew but not in Mark’s account, “saved” her daughter from cruel satanic domination, demonic torment. This woman is first and foremost a mother; she is not there for what she can get, but for what she wants for her “little girl.” Selfless and pure motives prevail in her heart. The high religious tone of her approach and address of Jesus. It says in verse 25 that she came worshipping him, *proskunnio*, and that word is likened to a loyal dog affectionately lapping its master! That underscores that the talk about dogs isn’t just about dogs at all . . . it is more like “use me as you would use your spaniel.” It is intimate, personal supplication and begging.

What jumps up and demands our attention in the words “only give me leave to follow you . . . unworthy as I am? If you don’t hear the cry of Peter at the time of his calling, if you don’t see the invitation “follow me” as familiar, it may be that you need to tune in and pay more attention. Marriage is an invitation to follow the husband as the husband follows God; it is not meant to be the blind leading the blind! If the man doesn’t know where he’s headed the better response to a proposal, regardless of how in love you might be, is “No thank you. I think I will pass.”

From the higher vantage point, we should note that this woman’s encounter with the Lord occurs in a time of great spiritual tumult and it falls between two massive healing campaigns. And both massive campaigns are attending by a miraculous feeding (first of 5,000 and later of 4,000 men, but women and children were included. We notice if we pay attention, that the disciples had returned from their mission hungry and tired in the first instance and in the second occasion, it was the crowd which was hungry and Jesus performed a sign/miracle in attending to these mass needs. The twelve baskets from the first feeding may well have been the food the twelve disciples needed.

These great stirrings, this religious revival, following the pathetic execution of John the Baptist, has greatly disturbed Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee and Perea (from 4 BC to AD 39). In his guilt-deranged mind, he supposes that John the Baptist has been resurrected, or that Elijah has appeared, or the Great Prophet. The Pharisees and Scribes have come to Jesus and suffered two reproofs. The first is for their hypocrisy. Like Demetrius and Amnon, they situation their sin and defilement in others. **Why do your disciples eat with**

unclean hands?, defiled as it were from attending the marketplace. Significantly, the marketplace was at that point in time a place to procure produce, meat and dietary essentials—the sick had been hauled there either to be healed by Jesus as he passed by, or to be healed by his disciples operating under His anointing. There was a hospital feel to the marketplace and fear of disease and contagion had good reason to be considered. But the multitudes being healed meant that Jesus could not be hidden easily. That weakens the hypothetical “Markan secret” explanation of deferred references to Jesus as Lord in Mark’s gospel.

Now I mentioned all of that to establish the centrality of the episode of the Syrophoenician woman. It is like a pause in the music. And while we catch our breath, we are shown that all of these healings transpired in individual encounters such as her’s. Matt. 15:25 reports simply, **Lord, help me.** I take this to be analogous to a woman’s “yes” to a proposal of marriage meaning that her prayer had a tenfold nature: it was short, humble, fervent, desperate, rational, respectful, worshipful, persevering, determined and faithful . . . I think that everyone who prays like that is very, very likely to experience answered prayer very often.

So, Act 2. Scene 1 represents the powerful effect of allusion. Another allusion, achieved through the misquotation of 1 Cor. 2:9 which is a paraphrase of Isaiah 64:4:

Eye has not seen, nor ear heard

Nor have entered into the heart of man

The things that God has prepared for those who love him.

What was in the hearts of the Pharisees and Scribes who came to criticize Jesus and his disciples revealed their own defilements. And those who asked for a sign, needed simply to look around to see what God was doing. Bottom gets Paul’s vision in Scripture quite wrong (it parallels his dream), but gets the spirit of that vision right. Come and see!

Amen.