

St. Andrew's UMC
August 17th, 2008
Matthew 15:10-28
"Listen and Understand"

I was watching a TV program, called, Brain Fitness, on one of the public stations. The doctors talked about the human brain's ability, and called it "plasticity." The brain gets used to certain mental and physical activities in repetition, and brain becomes plasticized in those activities.

In other words, the brain gets used to the repeated activities, and does them well. But the plasticity is like a rut, and once the brain has developed the plasticity in one thing, it is hard to change it. Although the human brain is able to learn a new thing, once it has learned it, the brain gets used to it, and it soon becomes an old thing, as if it is in the rut. It becomes, therefore, pretty tough to un-learn the old thing, and to learn the new thing. Despite the fact it is tough for the brain to learn new things, the presenter of the program showed, that the human brain can learn new things, and even repair, or regenerate, itself.

For example, the program showed the veterans who returned from Iraq war. Because of the hi-tech body armors, the soldiers do not die from the explosions as easily as before, but the majority of them suffer the brain trauma. After many months of the lengthy therapy, however, a soldier who could not previously use his left arm at all, could perform simple tasks, such as picking up and arranging objects on the table. His mother testified that she did not even believe her son would progress this much through the therapy. One of the speakers added that it was essential that the patient has the will to overcome the brain injury.

That got me thinking: how much of having the will to be made well has to do with the faith we know? The medical findings confirmed this: If the soldier believed that he could be healed of the brain injury, and continued to work with the therapy, the brain would regenerate itself, and rewire the neurons. From this finding, I could not really see the material difference between having the will to be made well and

having the faith to be made well. If there is, someone should please explain it to me.

This is a notable finding, because, if you follow the church's teachings, such a thing is supposed to happen only to those who have faith in God. Now I was looking at the medical finding that such healings could take place, apart from the religious intervention. There was no other external influence, medically speaking, that caused the healing. The action of healing took place within the soldier's body and mind.

Here, we must go back to the scripture, and examine carefully what happened to the daughter of the Gentile woman. After having preached in Judea, Jesus retreated to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Tyre is about 35 miles northwest of Lake Galilee, and Sidon is 20 miles further north of Tyre. They belonged to the Gentile territory.

A Gentile woman approached Jesus, and started shouting to get his attention. But Jesus ignored her completely. The woman's shouting came to the point that the disciples could not bear it, and asked Jesus to send her away. To this, Jesus replied, **"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."**

There had been attempts in the Christian circles to cast the meaning of this behavior of Jesus into a less damning light, but let us face it: Jesus was making it plain that he was called to help only the Jews, and he does not deal with the Gentiles.

You can call his attitude racist, but it was more of a religious training kicking in. The Gentiles were ritually unclean in the eyes of the Jews, and the Jews did not interact with the Gentiles, for the fear of the ritual contamination. And Jesus believed that his ministry was limited to reclaiming the Jews to God's fold.

This attitude of Jesus shows that Jesus himself also had to grow in his theological awareness of God's grace. Even though he distinguished what actually defiled a person, when it came to the Jewish-Gentile relationship, he was still bound by the teachings of the Hebrew ritual cleanliness, and of the belief that God the Father was

the God of the Jews *only*. When Jesus encountered with the Gentile woman, all this was about to change.

Jesus declared, much to the ire of the Pharisees, that it was not what the person ate that defiled the person, but what came out of the person that defiled. What made a person unclean, Jesus taught, was the expression of the human intention, not what came into the human body. The defilement originated from within the human individual.

Up to this point of his theological maturing, Jesus dealt with the theological rebuttal against the teachings of the Pharisees. His theology was confined within the Jewish category. Now Jesus faced the new question: What made the Gentiles unclean? The Gentile woman challenged Jesus to rethink why God would condemn the Gentiles to the perpetual state of defilement. The traditional understanding was: the Gentiles are unclean, because they are Gentiles.

The new question that challenged Jesus was: “Are the Gentiles unclean, because they did not eat in the manner of the Jews, or, are they unclean, because of what comes out of their hearts?”

The first question did not apply, of course, because Jesus said what goes into the person does not defile the person. Then, the second question had to apply to the Gentile woman. But all she did was asking for help. Asking for mercy did not defile a person, according to Jesus’ own teaching. Jesus could not justify his belief that the woman was too unclean for him to help her.

When Jesus heard that “even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table,” the enlightenment dawned upon him: God made the Gentiles, just as God did the Jews, and God loves them, too. The Gentile woman told Jesus that his God also cares for those people whom he called, “dogs.”

That was the moment of the theological awakening for Jesus. Suddenly, his understanding of God expanded beyond the boundary of the tribal perspective, and encompassed the universal attribute of God the Father.

Jesus was amazed that the “dog” had the better understanding of his God the Father, and that she had faith in the universal God the Father, unlike he did in his tribal God the Father. Jesus could not but declare: “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

Now this has been a long-winded detour from the discussion of what caused the healing (remember where we left off?), but here is the point: what healed the woman’s daughter did not come from outside, but it came from within herself. Jesus identified it as faith. The healing power was present within the woman, and it let her wish to be fulfilled.

This is not the only instance of the faith healing the sick. There are a few other instances, where Jesus acknowledges that it was the faith of the person that healed him or her (Mt. 9:22, 9:29; Lk. 7:50, 18:42).

There seems to be at least four aspects to the Christian faith: the first is *trusting*—as in trusting your old friend. Our faith is the dynamic act of trusting God.

The second is *understanding*—as in the cognitive understanding of the difference between what defiles a person and what does not. The understanding aspect of our faith provides us the discernment of what is true and what is not, what is God’s will and what is not.

The third is *obeying*—as in carrying out in practice what one is entrusted to. We love our enemies, even if that went against our grain. Our faith empowers us to put into a practice what we are commanded to do.

The fourth is *actualizing* what one wills or wishes—as in helping one’s daughter get rid of the unclean spirit. This aspect of our faith empowers us to heal our own illnesses, as well as those of our loved ones.

It is this fourth aspect of having faith that we are talking about in the story of the Gentile woman. The power came not from the outside. Jesus did not claim that it was his power that healed her daughter. It was her “great faith” that fulfilled her wish. The brain-damaged

soldier had the will power within himself to rewire the neurons of his brain, and repair it.

This gives us a reason to stop and ponder: Do we have the power to fulfill our wishes? Does this power reside within ourselves?

If I read the Bible correctly, Jesus believed that this power resided within the individual. Jesus was trying to show the followers that they had the power within themselves to make themselves well.

The Gentile woman had the power within her self to get rid of the unclean spirit. Jesus simply called it “faith.” For Jesus, this power was awakened in his trusting relationship with God the Father. For us, we have this power within ourselves to be awakened through our faithful relationship with God.

When we trust, understand, and obey God, I believe that the power within is channeled through our lives. We have to want it, believe it, act it, and trust that through our faithful relationship with God, we have the power within to fulfill our wishes.

Paul affirms this power in his letter to the Philippians: “I can do all things in him who strengthens me (4:13).”

It is our faith that makes us well, and Jesus wants to let it be done as the faithful wish.