

8.16.26 Sermon on Matthew 15:21-28

I am the kind of person that has a hard time with the idea of people being annoyed with me or not liking me. Accordingly, there have been times where I have not spoken up because I didn't want to ruffle feathers or have someone think about me negatively. As a consummate people-pleaser, I have always admired those who don't seem to care what others think, especially those who are tenacious advocates. I think about my friends Rev. Caitlin Ware and Rev. Brad Davis who never stop advocating for clean water in the southern coal fields, no matter who it runs the wrong way. They remind me of the Canaanite woman in today's story. She makes Jesus and his disciples deeply uncomfortable in her persistent advocacy for her daughter, and in doing so, she actually changes the trajectory of Jesus' ministry.

In today's story, one of the first things we learn is that Jesus has traveled into the region of Tyre and Sidon, which was outside the boundaries of Israel. It was in Gentile land. And there, a Canaanite woman, an outsider begins causing a ruckus by shouting after him, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented." Matthew wants us to notice her outsider status, and in fact, referring to her as a Canaanite was a deliberately loaded description. He could have called her a Syrophoenecian woman (as she is referred to in Mark's gospel), or a Gentile, but instead, he gives her the name of ancient Israel's enemy. She is not just an outsider, she is seen as someone who represents the enemy. And she comes asking Jesus for mercy.

At first, Jesus doesn't say anything. He just kind of ignores her. The disciples, on the other hand, notice her and devise a very clear solution: "Send her way, for she keeps shouting after us!" They find her to be loud and annoying. They don't want to listen to her anymore. Her suffering is not their problem. They want her out of their hair.

Then Jesus speaks in what I think is a surprising way, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, "Sorry ma'am, I can't help you. That's not in my job description." But the woman refuses to give up. She comes even closer, kneeling before Jesus, and says again, "Lord, help me."

You would think that this would be the moment that Jesus has mercy on her. Instead, he says something that feels really out of character: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." There is no good way to soften it. While the Greek word for dog can refer to a domesticated household dog or a wild street dog, the distinction doesn't make a whole lot of difference. The metaphor is not nice. And in it, Jesus has drawn a boundary between Israel, the children at the table, and this Gentile, the purported dog.

At this point, if I were the woman, I would have been very tempted to walk about from Jesus after this insult. But she doesn't. In fact, she doesn't even reject Jesus' metaphor. She pushes it even farther than Jesus has taken it. She says, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs from under their masters' table." She, this outside, Canaanite woman, reminds Jesus that there is still a place in God's economy, even for someone like her! She reminds him that God's mercy is more abundant, and that there is enough grace here for her and her daughter, too.

And Jesus suddenly responds in a much more expected fashion, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And with that, her daughter is healed.

So what exactly happened in this encounter? The verdict is still out, in my opinion. There are at least two ways that this story can be understood. One interpretation suggests that Jesus knew exactly what he was doing from the beginning, and his words were used to expose the disciples' assumptions about who did and did not belong. The disciples were the first ones to say "send her away." Perhaps Jesus is just taking their theology and holding it up like a mirror to reveal where it leads. The disciples believe that Jesus belongs to Israel alone, and maybe Jesus just decides to allow that assumption to play itself out until they realize that the outsider is actually demonstrating a greater level of faith than they. When we read it this way, Jesus is testing the disciples, working to expand their vision of the world.

The second interpretation is a bit more uncomfortable – and that is the interpretation that the woman actually changes Jesus' mind. It's not some sort of test that Jesus is placing before his disciples, it is actually a challenge to his own vision of the world and of his mission. This is uncomfortable because even though we confess that Jesus is fully divine and fully human, we don't really like to think about what that "fully human" part means. Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus "increased in wisdom and in years," Hebrews tells us that Jesus learned, and the incarnation means that Jesus was not just pretending to be human, he actually was. He entered into human life with all of its complexities and limitations. Jesus entered into a particular time and place, and into a culture and religion that made certain assumptions about the world. For Jesus, it would have been the norm for his community to be wary of outsiders, and to have a more insular focus. And so perhaps, Jesus enters into this encounter with the Canaanite woman truly believing that his ministry is directed only toward Israel. But then this loud, faithful, and persistent Canaanite woman helps him see that God's mission is much bigger than he initially understood.

So is Jesus testing the disciples, or is the Canaanite woman legitimately stretching Jesus' worldview? The text doesn't tell us what Jesus was thinking. I don't think we can come to a certain conclusion. And honestly, I'm not convinced that it matters, because what the text clearly does show us is that the circle becomes wider and the trajectory of Jesus' ministry changes after this. A boundary that was quite firm at the beginning of this story isn't so clear by the end.

Shortly after this experience, Jesus feeds another large crowd. We heard the story of the feeding of the 5,000 a couple of weeks ago – and after Jesus meets the Canaanite woman, he feeds 4,000 people – this time in a predominantly Gentile area. With the 5,000, he feeds a Jewish crowd. But here he will feed Gentiles – outsiders. I guess he realizes that they are worthy of more than crumbs – they are worthy of a feast too! Then at the end of Matthew's gospel, the risen Jesus appears to the disciples and tells them to go and make disciples of all nations. The mission that was originally centered around one community keeps expanding beyond all boundaries.

The book of Acts is a story of the disciples continually learning this reality. Even when the early church began to recognize that Gentiles had a place in the story, they still assumed that they would have to become culturally Jewish in order to follow Jesus. But the Holy Spirit keeps showing up amongst the Gentiles before the disciples even get there. God is always several steps ahead of the early church, breaking down boundaries and drawing the circle wider. While church leaders were debating about who was or wasn't included, the Holy Spirit was already ahead of them.

This story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman teach us of one of the most faithful things we can learn to say: "I was wrong, and my circle was too small. I see that God is already here." Maybe some of us have

experienced the same kind of stretching that Jesus and the disciples experienced. Maybe you grew up in a Christian context hearing that LGBTQ people are dangerous or outside of God's design for people. But then maybe you had a child or friend, or even you yourself, who came out, and that changes everything. Suddenly an abstract issue has a name and a story. And sometimes that is all that is needed for a shift to begin to take place. Maybe for you, the theology that once seemed so settled is suddenly confronted by a very real and proximate relationship.

The same thing can happen in a multitude of other situations. Whenever our paths cross with someone who we would deem as other and we are confronted with their humanity, that's where God is working to change us – not because someone makes the most compelling argument, but because we have encountered a person created in the image of God.

Recognizing one another's humanity is enormously important, especially at in this particular moment. There are powerful forces encouraging us to make our circles small, more homogenous. We are being told to fear immigrants and refugees as invaders. We hear continual vitriol that names transgender people, including trans children, as threats to eliminate. Any religion other than a very particular version of Christianity is treated with suspicion or outright hostility. People experiencing homelessness are increasingly viewed as nuisances to remove. And through and over all of that is another very dangerous shrinking circle – that of Christian nationalism, which claims that America somehow belongs only to a particular kind of Christian, and that the Christian's task it to seize cultural and political power to make sure it stays that way.

The gospel, however, pushes us in the opposite direction. Rather than drawing smaller circles, we are called to draw larger ones. When the powerful forces that encourage us to draw our circles smaller speak, Jesus counters them by asking us who have we forgotten belongs to God? Those forces say that there is not enough room for strangers, that protecting "our people" means we have to exclude "those others," or that some people's very existence is a threat. The forces of nationalism teach us to divide the world into those who matter and those who don't.

But then this pesky Canaanite woman comes shouting after Jesus. "Lord, help me!" Do you hear her? Her voice is still calling out to us today through the one overlooked, the one called other. She is shouting from Delaney Hall, and Dilley. She is shouting from Rafah and Hebron. She is shouting alongside families who wonder if their children are safe in their own communities. She is shouting from Shrewsbury Street and South Central Jail. She is shouting from every place where human beings have been told explicitly or implicitly, "There is no place at the table for you."

We, the church, have a choice. We can join with the disciples in saying, "Send her away. Let it be someone else's problem. It's not ours." Or, we can allow our vision to be expanded, to draw the circle wider. This Canaanite woman, the one painted as not only the other, but as the ancient foe, has a better understanding of God's economy of mercy than anyone else in the story. She doesn't ask for the children of Israel to go hungry, and she doesn't ask to take anyone else's place at the table. Instead, she recognizes that God's mercy is abundant enough to spill off the table, even to the dogs underneath. She is the one who names that there is actually enough.

And so it is with God's grace. God's love for immigrants doesn't diminish God's love for citizens. Likewise, God's affirmation of trans people doesn't diminish anyone else's value. Making room to affirm that there is goodness in Muslims, or Jews, or pagans, or atheists, or people of any or no faith, does not threaten Christians or Christianity. This type of freedom for someone else does not take away from ours.

The disciples, in this story, assume that grace is like a pie, with only so many slices available. They need to go to the children of Israel, they say! But that's not what grace is like. Grace is more like a table with endless leaves to expand it. Another chair added does not take away from the ones already there.

An interesting note about this story – right before Jesus meets the Canaanite woman, he is arguing with religious leaders about purity. They are concerned about what people eat and what makes someone clean or unclear. Jesus tells them that what really makes someone unclean is what comes out of the human heart. And then Matthew immediately takes Jesus into Gentile territory and shows us what this looks like played out in real time. It's like Matthew is asking us, "Did you understand what Jesus just said to the leaders?"

What comes out of our heart when the stranger shows up? When the immigrant shows up, or the trans teen shows up, or the Muslim neighbor shows up? What comes out of our heart when the person whose politics enrage us shows up? What comes out of our heart when someone we've been taught to fear shows up, asking for help? Here is where the rubber meets the road when it comes to grace. Do we believe in grace in theory, or in actuality?

Maybe Jesus was testing his disciples that day, or maybe he himself was discovering something new. We can faithfully wrestle with that question. But either way, the disciples leave that encounter knowing something they didn't before – that the circle was bigger than they thought. When we follow Jesus, the same will keep happening to us, too. There should be people we understand differently today than we did a decade ago. Likewise, there should be assumptions we once held that we have now learned to question. There should be people in our lives whose stories have changed us.

Our journey with Jesus will always expand our capacity to love, challenge the boundaries we've inherited, and bring us into relationship with people we would have never sought out on our own, because we go where he goes. The Christian life is not about drawing lines and guarding them. It's about following Christ outside of the circles we have drawn, as we, ourselves are drawn more fully into the abundant grace of God. God's table is big, and there is enough room. So pull up a chair, and let's make space next to us, because who knows who God will bring to the table next. Amen.