

The 16th Sunday after Pentecost
September 8, 2024
Isaiah 35:4-7a, Psalm 146, James 2:1-17
John 7:24-37

The Message that Crosses Boundaries

Imagine what it must have been like for the Gentile woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit, and was suffering so greatly. She must have felt such pain, as if her own heart had been pierced, and experienced the helplessness of not knowing where to turn. And then the word spread that Jesus, the Jewish teacher, was in the neighborhood, in Tyre. Even in the Gentile lands his reputation for powerful teaching and preaching, and his compassion and care for those who were suffering and in need of healing, went before him. Yet she probably feared that as a Gentile and a woman, she should not seek help from Jesus. Despair and hope battled in her heart, and wild hope overcame the despair, and she approached Jesus. She bowed down at his feet, and begged him, beseeched him, to cast the demon out of her daughter. And then he said the words she did not want to hear, “Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” In courage born of desperation and love for her daughter, and

faith in Jesus, despite his words, she boldly says “Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” Startled, and amazed, Jesus said to her “For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.” Imagine the wild hope and exhilaration she felt as she flew over the dusty roads, faster and faster, to get to her home, and when she flung open the door, she saw her daughter, lying on the bed, free of the demon, and restored to health. Imagine the wild joy, the gratitude, she felt.

And yet, here we have a hard saying of Jesus. His first words to her seem so cruel, so insulting. We’ve just read in the prior passages of Mark’s Gospel about how he has come to bring healing and wholeness to all, not just to the “respectable” people who all too often were haughty and self-absorbed, lacking in compassion. He taught that the sabbath was made for man, and that we need to look at the spirit of the law and not the mere letter of the law. And Gentile or not, it’s hard to accept that he told this poor woman, who has been through hell, whose daughter was being tormented by a demon, that he couldn’t help her! In fact, it seems he has insulted her, saying he can’t give the children’s

bread to the dogs. Was he calling her a dog? Where is the kind, compassionate Jesus who included everyone in the circle of God's concern? What are we to make of this?

Well, let's go back to the beginning of the passage. Jesus went to the region of Tyre, in Gentile territory. He was tired at the end of the long day, and wanted to rest. Our Scripture passage says he entered a house, but did not want anyone to know that he was there. And yet, as is often the case with Jesus, "he could not escape notice." People had a way of tracking him down. And then, he encountered the woman. And she's not only a Gentile, but from the region of Syrophonecia, and her ancestors were Canaanites and Moabites, who were considered enemies of the Jewish people from way back.

So here we have Jesus, tired, wanting to be alone, human as well as divine, and in his humanity, I believe he was not all-knowing, and grew in his understanding of his ministry as time went on. At first, he probably understood his ministry to be primarily to the people of Israel, and later to the Gentiles. Like the rest of us, he had to learn and wrestle with God's call to him. What he said to the woman also reflected the

tradition and custom of his time, namely, that Israel was considered the chosen covenant people of God, and others were outsiders. I don't believe he was saying that the woman was a dog, but in the order of things, the children are fed before the dogs, that is, the people of Israel are Jesus' first concern, and then others. The woman, though, was not to be deterred, and she turned the tables on Jesus, as he so often turned them on others. She said to him, yes, that's true, but even the dogs can share in some of the leftover bounty, the crumbs that fall from the table in the course of the meal. They share in the abundance of the master, too, and even the crumbs contain healing and grace for those who partake of them! Jesus was moved by her words, and by the faith behind them. Would that he found such faith in the house of Israel! He was moved by her faith and her persistence, and her daughter was healed. So Jesus could have continued in his refusal, but he didn't. He was open to learning, and growing in grace through his encounters with others. Though he is divine as well as human, he was willing to have his perspective expanded, and he began to proclaim his message to everyone, Jew and Gentile alike.

So as Jesus was open to a different perspective, so we are to be open to transformation and change. We need to be unafraid to examine old assumptions, and when we read scripture, to honor and live into the questions we find there. Growing in faith and understanding of God's call to us isn't always a neat and orderly process, but is messy, filled with loose ends, paradox, and unanswered questions. As we follow Jesus and seek to grow as his disciples, we can expect our world to be turned upside down, topsy-turvy, and traditions and doctrines we found so important really aren't of that much consequence in the Kingdom of God, and what is really important is wholeheartedly loving God and our neighbors and as ourselves, and walking in ways of justice, compassion, and peace. As we follow Jesus, we will discover that God's delight is to widen the circle of inclusion, of the blessings of love and hope and grace, to the ends of the earth, so that all will have a place at the banquet table.

Like the woman in the story, we can be honest and direct in our faith. She opened her heart to Jesus, and boldly asked for what she wanted- healing for her daughter. She wouldn't take no for an answer.

This doesn't mean that we can expect God to answer our prayer exactly in the way we want him to, like some celestial genie. But we can have bold faith that God hears and receives the deep, earnest prayers of our hearts, and though he may not always answer our prayers in the way we expect or hope for, his will for us is healing, and growth, grace, and transformation.

And today's Scripture is about expanded boundaries, about a new way of seeing the world, and who we consider to be our neighbor. It's human nature to want to move in circles of people who are like us, culturally, ethnically, of the same world view, religions faith, and socioeconomic class. We may want to move out of our comfort zone, but it isn't easy. I know that I speak about the importance of multiculturalism and diversity, yet for a long time almost all of my closest friends were Caucasians in the same socioeconomic grouping, with similar political and religious views. It doesn't take as much work, you see. And there is nothing wrong with having circles of friends who have these things in common. And yet, God is calling us to a higher way, where we seek to build a beloved community and houses of prayer for

all people, where we welcome the stranger as well as the friend, where we reach out to the foreigner and the sojourner, and make sure that everyone has a place at the table that is the banquet of grace and fellowship.

Who are the people on the outside in our own day, the people we shun or avoid? Are they those suffering with mental illness, or those of a different sexual orientation from our own? Perhaps their theology is more liberal or conservative than ours, or we condemn their political views. Jesus is calling us to move out of these positions of us vs them, where we hunker down and cling to our own limited perspective so tightly. Like Jesus, I hope we can learn to be open to the voices of others who are different from us, or don't agree with us, so that together, we can grow in fellowship, in bridge-building, and in grace. Amen.