

Out of Bounds

Today's gospel lesson is a tough one – a story of Jesus that shows him in a way that is truthfully a little uncomfortable.

Jesus is in Tyre and Sidon – outside of Judean territory. He may have left to take a break from arguing with the Pharisees. We read the last of those arguments – over ritual washing of hands before a meal. Jesus' disciples didn't do it, and the Pharisees took issue.

Jesus tries to tell them that it is what comes out of a person's mouth is what matters, not what goes into it or how it is washed, but they don't get it. It's not clear his disciples do either. They are so caught up in the law's idea that you can somehow make yourself pure enough physically to be acceptable to God – they can't see how impossible that is.

So Jesus moves on. Tries to get away. He goes into gentile territory, where he won't have to deal with these kinds of debates. But this woman whose daughter, she says, is possessed by a demon keeps shouting – actual word would be more like screaming – for him to help – “Show me mercy, Son of David!”

Makes matters worse is who this woman is. Name of ethnicity is not consistent in the gospels – Mark uses a Greco-Roman term – Matthew a middle-eastern one. Point is – she is a foreigner – a gentile – part of one of the other people's in the land that the Jewish people have been fighting with and separating themselves from for centuries. She's not calling Jesus “Son of David” as a recognition of his status as messiah, btw – that is just an acknowledgement of the people he is a part of – more an emphasis of her foreign-ness than an indication of her faith. And she won't leave Jesus alone.

Then the tough part starts. Jesus ignores her. He says he is only there to help the people of Israel – God's lost sheep – not her. The disciples want him to send her away - the text literally says “cast her out” – the same language it uses to describe what is done to demons. But she persists. She kneels before him. She begs – “Please help me!”

Then comes the part that moves beyond tough into the realm of being outright shocking. Jesus says to her: “It is not good to take the children's bread and toss it to dogs.” Dogs – one of the most insulting comparisons you can make in the Middle East. Dogs aren't pets. They live around the community, but they don't live in the house, they live outside, mostly scavenging trash. Some translators try

to soften this – make it “puppies” – but that isn’t what the text says. Other commentaries try to say that Jesus isn’t really insulting the woman, he’s just testing her faith. But I can’t say I buy that either.

I think what we are seeing here is a fully human Jesus – tired, annoyed – and convinced that his mission is just what he said it was – to rescue the lost sheep of Israel, not this woman.

But then the woman – instead of taking offense or being deterred by his words, says something remarkable “Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their masters’ table.”

And when Jesus hears that – the words that come from her mouth – the words that demonstrate that she is filled with faith, despite the fact that she likely knows almost nothing about God as God is understood by the Jewish tradition, despite the fact that she may not even believe in God, or that there is only one God and not many – he realizes – or remembers – what God REALLY wants. Not just to rescue the lost sheep of Israel – but to rescue all God’s children.

He sees her faith that that God, however she understands God, wants her daughter to be whole again. And he finally does send her off, lovingly. Not with scorn, but with a promise that her daughter is now healed.

And as you read forward Matthew you shows us that this encounter has an effect on him – that his entire mission has changed. The very next scene: Jesus is still in gentile territory, and again he is surrounded by crowds in need of healing, and he heals them – their blindness, their paralysis, their inability to talk – and they cry out “blessed be the God of Israel”. That matters – not “Blessed be our God,” not “Blessed be the One true and only God”: blessed be the God we see in Jesus, the God of Israel. These people are gentiles. Jesus is now healing all comers – extending God’s grace to whoever asks.

And then Matthew tells us he feeds the crowd, calls them all to sit down while he provides 4,000 men (plus women and children of course), with food from another short supply. A Jewish teacher and his Jewish followers sitting down to eat with a crowd of mostly gentiles. They probably don’t even wash their hands first!

Matthew is the only gospel writer who tells this story twice, and I think he likely does it to emphasize just this fact: Jesus is now operating not just outside the boundaries of Judah, he is operating outside the bounds of the religious tradition of his time.

This woman – Canaanite, Syro-Phoecian – whatever we want to call her – with her insistence on being heard and her faith that Jesus had hope to offer her daughter – changed Jesus’ ministry, unleashed God’s healing for many, many, others who might otherwise have been ignored. In a time when it was literally an article of faith that his people and his people alone were truly ‘God’s people’, Jesus is inviting everyone to the table.

Paul is dealing with something similar in the passage we read in Romans. Earlier in this letter Paul had addressed the Christians in Rome who considered themselves Jewish. He told them that being descendants of Abraham was a gift that gave them a longer, deeper, understanding of God – but it didn’t entitle them to any special privileges. He told them that the Law they followed had been valuable in keeping them too far away from God, but now that God had been fully revealed in Christ those who found God through him had no need of it.

But now he is talking to the gentiles. They had made the opposite mistake. Evidently some had come to believe that now that Christ had come, God’s promises to Abraham no longer applied, that it had become null and void.

And Paul says – By no means! The language is perhaps even a bit stronger than that – let’s say “Heck no!”. Paul says God’s promises can never be taken back. Have some of the Jewish people rejected the gospel – yes – but Paul reminds the gentiles that they were disobedient to God before too – but God still accepted them – saved them. Then he says the most amazing thing: “God has locked up all people in disobedience, in order to have mercy on all of them.”

I don’t think that Paul thought God forced anyone to disobey. I think he means that God allows everyone to make their choices – good ones, and inevitably some bad ones too. But God is always ready to respond anyone, everyone, when we finally wake up and realize our need for God. No boundaries, no favorites, just grace. That’s what God always wanted – that is what God sent Jesus to do.

Now you might be wondering why I am pushing on this so hard. Please know that it’s NOT because I think anyone here thinks that we have a special claim on God – as residents of Woodland Park, as Coloradans, as Americans.

But I do think that right now, in this place and time in our country – it’s not enough just to know that. Simply knowing in our hearts and believing in our heads that God loves all people is not enough, not when groups march to assert their superiority over other races and ethnicities and too often claim that God backs their views.

We have to say it. Clearly and often, to whomever needs to hear it: God does not play favorites: among countries, among races, among cultures. It's one of the central tenets of our Wesleyan tradition: God's grace is "prevenient", that is, it was extended toward us before we were ever aware of it, and it is extended toward everyone else on earth whether they are aware of it or not.

We need to proclaim that Gospel clearly and compellingly, the good news that Jesus' cross and resurrection reveal that God's love is, in fact, for all; that God is working in us and with us and through us to make this world a more just and equitable place for everyone, not just those who see God and the world the same way we do.

Because the Gospel is more than a helpful set of instructions or a collection of good advice. It doesn't just educate us – it changes us - creates in us the ability to do what God would have us do and be the persons God calls us to be. And God calls us to be people of courage and conviction who know what they believe, but also people still willing to share with, and learn from, those whose lives and experiences are different than our own. It calls us to live with, share with, and care for those who we might be tempted to think are beyond God's redemption: to talk with them even when the conversations are hard, to love them even if they only meet us with hate in return.

It's not a calling to compromise what we believe about God, but it IS a call to be willing to change what we believe about others, to see them as God does: beloved children, worth of grace.

It is a hard calling. But one that comes with a promise – that God will grant us courage and grace sufficient to meet the challenges of the day; and when we stand with and for those who suffer or are persecuted, those who are rejected or scorned, those who are lost or lonely, we will find Jesus Christ standing there beside us.

Thanks be to God. AMEN