

# Borders and Boundaries

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**THIRD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

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**Isaiah 56: 1, 6-8**

**Matthew 15: 21-28**

Our text this morning is about borders and boundaries, compassion and transformation. At first glance it appears to be about Jesus' transformation. A foreigner from the other side of the border makes an unfair request of Jesus. He initially ignores the request, then tells her why it is an unfair request, then grants the request. This appears to be a transformation, but I believe that Jesus was modeling for his disciples and for us an appreciation for the wideness of God's mercy at the borders and the boundaries. This is where real transformation always seems to take place. It is a transformation from narrow traditions and rules to a broad perspective governed by compassion; it is a transformation from exclusion to inclusion. There are many stories in our present time about such matters, but one from the August 8, 2017 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* caught my attention. It is titled, "Prisoner of My Preconceptions." The physician writer, Dr. Jason Chertoff, speaks of being on duty in his Medical Intensive Care Unit when he learns that a prisoner from the regional correctional facility was being brought in to the hospital with sepsis.

He finds himself muttering about the annoyance of patients from the prison. They often do poorly. He assumes that prisoners are usually "bad people" who have wantonly broken the law. They have violated the rules of society. As these thoughts are going through his head, the prisoner is wheeled in. He is heavily shackled with cuffs on his wrists and ankles, though he is heavily sedated and intubated on a ventilator. He arrives with a diagnosis of lymphoma; a malodorous, decaying leg infection; and a severe pneumonia with a large accumulation of infected fluid in his left lung. The sepsis protocol is initiated, and the physician asks an intern to get consent for a chest tube to drain the lung fluid. He suspects the man has no family and that the intern will come up empty handed. Much to his surprise, the intern soon returns with consent from the man's wife. The prisoner has a wife and three children and has been in regular contact with them. As Dr. Chertoff prepares to insert the chest tube, he reflects, "I was suddenly jolted by compassion as I gazed

into his lifeless eyes. I cannot attribute this emotional reaction to any specific event other than a fortunate revelation. To me he was suddenly no longer a prisoner; he was a human being who had a wife and children who cared for him. Indeed, he likely made unsound decisions in the past, but right at that moment he did not resemble a convict, but instead a vulnerable person who was gravely ill. It is rare to have such an indelible emotional connection with a complete stranger, especially one whom my past prejudices would have precluded.”

Rare indeed, to break through prejudices and see the other, whom one may despise or, at the very least, consider unworthy of one’s time and attention, to see that person as a human being and respond to the person’s need with compassion. This story strikes a resonance for me with the story we read in Matthew. Like the prisoner on the border of good and evil, holy and demonic, acceptable and unacceptable, the Canaanite woman and her daughter also come from a similar border. This one was imposed by the culture, which set a boundary around “Canaanites”—the historic enemies of Israel. The God of Israel had given their land to the Israelites. The Canaanites were forced out to the coastlands in the region of Tyre and Sidon and modern-day Lebanon. This woman from outside the boundaries and at the border of demonic and holy confronts Jesus—this Jesus whom Prof. Tom Long describes as “the Jew who stands as the culmination of all of Israel’s history” (Thomas Long, *Matthew*, p. 176). And she confronts Jesus about her demon-possessed daughter’s need for healing. Jesus knows his disciples are watching him and wondering what he will do. Canaanites were a rejected people—at the border and outside the boundary. Shouldn’t all Canaanites be avoided?

Before we examine the woman’s confrontation with Jesus we should consider the Biblical context of this story. In the previous chapter in Matthew, Jesus feeds the 5,000 men, besides women and children. Then, that evening, Peter sinks during his attempt to walk on the water toward Jesus, and Jesus points out his “little faith.” Just prior to the story of the Canaanite woman, the Pharisees and scribes come to Jesus from Jerusalem to complain that he is breaking the tradition. Jesus counters by noting their breaking of commandments and their duplicity. He then departs and goes away into the district of Tyre and Sidon, a coastal region inhabited by Gentiles, the dispossessed Canaanites. Why does Jesus go there? What point is he making?

A Canaanite woman appears, and starts shouting, actually shrieking, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” So this Gentile woman, outside the boundary of Israel, recognizes Jesus as the Messiah! If we identify with anyone in this story, perhaps it should be with this woman. She is a Gentile, like us; she recognizes Jesus’ special relationship with God, and she does not come to criticize him, as the Jewish leaders did. She sees in Jesus a person who conveys the mercy, the compassion, of God. Jesus’ response to her is silence! Silence. If, in your deepest despair about your life situation, you wondered if God

was listening to your plea for help, that is exactly how this woman must have felt. And then the disciples come to Jesus and urge him to send her away. Her shrieking unnerves them, though they don't rebuke her themselves. Perhaps they are awed by her recognition of Jesus as Son of David in this one chance encounter. They have only recently recognized Jesus as "Son of God."

Jesus responds to the disciples and the woman: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus is stating that he is the spiritual leader of the Jews, with whom Gentiles have nothing in common. She needs to seek help from her own kind. This seems very harsh...unless Jesus is testing her, which I would like to believe is the case. If it is a test, she passes. Instead of walking off in a huff, she kneels in a posture of worship and simply replies, "Lord, help me." We now expect that Jesus will grant her request. That is what he usually does when a person gets on their knees and begs for help. But no, he insults her and further tests her trust in God's compassion: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The Greek even employs the diminutive—"immature dogs." Now surely she'll give up on any notion that Jesus is a compassionate Messiah! But no. Though insulted and seemingly rejected, nevertheless she persisted! She accepts Jesus' claim that she is unworthy: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." To express it another way: "Yes, Lord, my circumstances place me outside God's covenant with Israel, and I know that I am supposed to hate Jews, but I also know that you are the Lord, the Son of David and your God is my God. I am on the border and outside the boundary, but I know that God's compassion includes me, and I will persist in my prayer for the healing you can give me." Jesus responds: "Woman, great is your faith!" That is an amazing contrast to his statement about Peter's "little faith."

What should we take from this encounter? I am struck by three key elements. First, both the woman and her daughter are on the border and outside the boundary of what Jews like Jesus and his disciples would consider acceptable. The women are excluded because of their Canaanite identity; they are excluded by demon possession; they are excluded as women in a male-dominant society. Anyone who is located on the border or outside some boundary established by our society can identify with this Canaanite woman. She and her daughter are victims of circumstances that result in bias, prejudice, and exclusion. We can think of many persons who fall into this category. This morning, listening to Krista Tippett's program, "On Being," I learned about Ruby Sales and am embarrassed to admit that I did not know who she was until this morning. She grew up in the segregated south and marched from Selma to Montgomery when she was 17 years old. She always knew that segregation was wrong. After the march, she and others protested at the site of a "whites only" store. She was arrested and jailed and not released from jail for six days. Then, she and some friends went to a store for a soda. She was

confronted by a shotgun wielding man. One of her fellow protestors was Jonathan Daniels, a white Episcopal divinity school student. He pushed her aside and took the shot meant for her, dying instantly. The shooter was later acquitted by a jury of twelve white men. Jonathan Daniels, who died 52 years ago today, was recognized as a saint by the Episcopal Church. Ruby Sales, though on the border as a black woman in America, never doubted her inclusion as a child of God.

Second, we and the disciples are easily “prisoners of our preconceptions.” Listen to what the disciples were saying: “She is not one of us; she doesn’t have our beliefs; she should be sent away.” We are all guilty of preconceptions about the value of certain others in the eyes of God. In the latest *Christian Century* Craig Barnes tells about the turmoil that arose when he invited the Reverend Tim Keller, a Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) pastor, to receive an award for his ministry and speak at Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS). There were objections from some students because the PCA does not ordain women or LGBTQ individuals. Dr. Barnes kept emphasizing to students that the PTS community is “centered in Christ. We all belong to him. If we are clear about that, we don’t have to worry about boundaries because the center will always hold.” Ultimately, the award was rescinded, but Rev. Keller spoke on campus without any demonstrations.

Finally, great faith is measured by confidence that God’s mercy includes all persons, beyond any human borders and boundaries. With Christ at the center, as Craig Barnes noted, boundaries become irrelevant. And this great faith is characterized by persistence—persistence especially in prayer, like the Canaanite woman, who never doubted the validity of her claim to God’s mercy.

We live in dark times. But we can find hope in the promise of transformation by the grace of God when borders and boundaries become irrelevant. All are embraced by God’s mercy. Great faith is all about trusting in God’s acceptance and compassion. Living that faith is about persistence in prayer to the God who will not abandon us. Tomorrow we experience a total eclipse of the sun. To varying degrees and in various locations our sunlit world will become dark. A short time later, light will appear once again. This is a metaphor of life. When the world becomes dark, the children of light (that’s us) ignore borders and boundaries to be reflections of God’s love. And light bursts forth to reassure us, as Isaiah did, that God is gathering in all the outcasts, and God’s compassion for all God’s children will ultimately prevail.

The challenge I leave with you is to be the children of light and to stand up against any behavior or social policy that conveys contempt for the humanity of any person. That is ultimately what Jesus modeled for his disciples. Amen.