

What Next? Bold to Ask and Willing to Learn
Matthew 15: (10-20) 21-28
Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

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If this story from Matthew's gospel makes you a little uncomfortable to hear, you're not alone. It does eventually get to the "happy ending" if you will, but not without at least making us consider the difficult-to-accept picture of Jesus that it paints. As one person said, "I don't like the story because it makes Jesus look mean to the woman...disrespectful toward her."

It is troubling to read that Jesus ignores the pleas of the woman...dismisses her...as if he doesn't even see her. Even more so, it's an offense to our sensibilities (or at least it should be) that Jesus basically compares her to a dog – even if metaphorically. Why would Jesus, who for the previous 14 chapters of Matthew's gospel has preached a message of compassion and love, suddenly become so seemingly rude and insensitive? Why would he first ignore her, then refuse her cries for help, and only after her challenge to him, show compassion to her?

If you go searching for an answer, you are going to find numerous theories about what was happening in the interaction, but none come with any certainty. The reality is that the written word doesn't convey tone, mood, or intent. We don't know why Jesus interacted with the woman the way he did, and neither Jesus nor Matthew offer an explanation.

We have no choice but to live with the unpleasant ambiguity.

Nonetheless we can certainly learn from it.

A little background on the significance of this woman's identity might help teach us.

First, she is a Canaanite. Standing toe-to-toe with Jesus reminds us that there was a cultural, religious, and ethnic boundary between Israel and Canaan. The Canaanites were despised by the Israelites for their worship of false gods, and any Jew who came into contact with a Canaanite would be considered unclean for a period of time.

In addition, as a woman in the first century, she would have had virtually no voice in society other than that of her husband or her father, neither of whom are in this picture. By addressing Jesus directly, she was crossing all sorts of boundaries, norms and laws. Likewise, by all practical and legal standards, Jesus was well within in his right to ignore her...and the disciples had plenty of cause to send her away.

However, Jesus was never about the practical or the legalistic. He was always about the heart. In fact, the lesson just before this story speaks to that very thing. The purity

laws and holiness codes were not what made one acceptable to God or caused one to sin. It is, instead, whatever is carried in the heart.

At its core, this gospel story is about the lines we draw which separate us from one another – lines that ultimately keep us from offering God’s mercy to others - lines that are almost always arbitrarily drawn, based on the external rather than the internal. Sometimes the lines are drawn based on choices and preferences...and other times, they are based on things beyond a person’s control.

Now, here’s the thing with these lines: we may not even recognize that we’ve drawn them...until we suddenly realize we don’t want to cross them.

This was the case for me several years ago when I was completing my residency as a hospital chaplain. Now, let me just say up front, this was not one of my proudest moments and I’ve wrestled since Thursday over the wisdom of sharing it. It was, however, a turning point in my self-awareness, my sense of call, and the direction of my ministry – which I believe is not unlike what happened for the disciples in this story, and perhaps even for Jesus to some extent. I have decided it’s worth the risk of vulnerability to share how God erased lines I had drawn.

During my residency, I was initially assigned to the Simon Cancer Center, where I discovered that providing merciful pastoral care to the cancer patients and their families was a privilege. I looked forward to every shift, knowing that while my heart would be broken at times, I would also be blessed and inspired by the stories people shared.

After a couple of months, I was given a second assignment at Methodist hospital, on a unit where most of the patients were non-compliant diabetics, overdose victims, or addicts seeking narcotic pain killers. I immediately noticed two things. One, it took a lot more emotional and spiritual energy to be a chaplain on that unit. And two, I no longer felt the same eagerness to start my shift on the days I served at Methodist rather than Simon.

Eventually, with help from my supervisor and colleagues, I came to see that I had subconsciously drawn a line between the patients whose situations I believed were “not their fault” and the patients who had brought their problems on themselves. Lots of factors shaped that line – including childhood theology, cultural influences, serving as a law enforcement chaplain, and my own legalism.

I’m still embarrassed to admit that this line existed within my heart and that it took a lot of soul-searching to erase it. I eventually did, though, because of encounters like the one Jesus had with this Canaanite woman.

As I continued to visit patients on both units, I discovered that the spiritual needs and cries were the same on both sides of my “made up” line. By sitting in conversations... learning about health journeys...hearing of the many unseen forces that had shaped the lives and, subsequently, choices, of patients on both units...(basically, seeing the

patients as real people with untold backstories neither better nor worse), my perspective was changed and my heart broken... opened...in a whole new way.

Thankfully, God mercifully grew me through these one-on-one experiences, revealed my embedded bias, helped me see how foolish I had been, and graciously expanded my ministry to the least and the lost far beyond what I could have ever thought possible all those years ago.

God does this, you know. God crosses lines all the time. And thanks be to God for that! I mean, we are all on the wrong side of someone's line. Yet, in Christ, God is willing to cross any and all proverbial "lines" in order extend mercy and grace to all who call for it - no matter what.

God also expands the circle of welcome. All. The. Time. God's kingdom is ever-growing and inclusive. We heard it from the prophet Isaiah this morning: Speaking of the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord: *"The God who gathers the outcasts of Israel will gather others to them, besides those already gathered."* Envision the ever-expanding gathering of people...those we expect...and those we do not...coming together under God's encompassing love.

As a corollary, **God is also ever-expanding the mission and kingdom-building ministry of the church**...calling us to extend compassion beyond any lines or walls we have put in place – intentionally or unintentionally.

God also sends, what one pastor called, "annoying angels" like the Canaanite woman to challenge our perceptions and prejudices...to ask the bold questions...to insist that we "see and hear" rather than "duck and dodge"...to demand that the church lead with compassion, cross our embedded lines of separation, and offer Christ-like mercy to those who cry out. Regardless and period.

Friends, the Canaanite woman is as much a teacher in this story as Jesus. She is oh, so bold and courageous. She is passionate and loves her daughter fiercely. She knows exactly who Jesus is. She understands the rules and the relationship...AND she approaches him anyway.

Clearly, she is familiar with Jesus' ministry of healing, driving out demons, and feeding the multitude. She's heard the stories. She knows who he is and what he's been up to. But there's more. She also KNOWS (heart) who Jesus is. She understands that Jesus is Lord...that he sits at the head of the Master's Table.

She acknowledges that Jesus has come for the lost sheep of Israel...that they are the core focus of his mission and message. YET, as she points out...Jesus is still compelled to hear her, see her, and respond to her cry. Her brilliant response to Jesus' insult demonstrates she KNOWS in her spirit, believes in heart, and has faith that Jesus is both compelled and capable of crossing the line to have mercy on her as well.

Because, the God of the lost sheep of Israel, the Father God of Jesus, is capable of nothing less.

She reminds Jesus (and all who were listening) that God is merciful to all who call upon God's name...because mercy is core to who God is. God is compassionate to all who call upon God's name...because compassion is core to who God is.

So, "Yes, Lord", she says. "You have surely come to the lost sheep of Israel...I respect that...and honor that...but you are also here for me...because the God of Israel is a God of abundance. There is enough grace and mercy to go around." In short, God's compassion and mercy and love is not pie. To offer God's grace to one person is DOES NOT diminish that which is given to others...so cross over the line and serve it to all...abundantly.

Don't you just love this woman's boldness to ask? To challenge the status quo...yet not with a contrarian attitude or by shaming and discrediting Jesus. Instead, she comes with passion and love at her core, with utter respect for God's power and presence, and with keen insight into that which is **of the world** and **that which is of God**.

In a sense, her demand for mercy...her bold challenge to the "line" that separated her from God's mercy, resulted in bringing everyone up a notch on the compassion scale. Her bold ask for Jesus to reconsider to whom he was called and capable of showing compassion resulted in a wider lens vision of Jesus' ministry, and subsequently an expansion of the mission of the church. Perhaps most significantly, her relentless pursuit to be seen and heard, and to advocate for another, has opened the hearts and minds of Jesus-followers through the ages to a whole new level of self-awareness – of our own biases, of the people to whom we are called to show mercy and compassion, and of the inclusive and expansive nature of God's love.

She was bold to ask and taught those who are willing to learn.

Friends, as we enter this season of intentional interim ministry, I can't help but make a comparison between the work we face and the example this story offers. In short, as a congregation, there will be times when we will need to be bold to ask and even more when we must be willing to learn.

So let's just put this on the table...churches have lines. All churches have lines. Every congregation draws them around any number of things – at times with intention and other times, completely unaware. Sometimes the lines are demarcations of perceived insiders and outsiders. Those in the know and those who are not. Those who agree with status quo and those who would like to see it changed. Sometimes lines are etched around things folks want to protect...the things they do not want changed.

Nearly every congregation has what I call the Legacy line. It represents the beautiful accomplishments that a congregation stands upon...at times so solidly that they risk becoming stuck there.

There's also the line of **always done it this way**...and the line of NEVER done it **that** way. And a line around what we believe is possible...and what is not.

Imagine for a moment though...what God might have waiting on the other side of any of these lines!

The interim process provides the space for us to be bold to ask...to challenge the lines...NOT as an act of contention or disparagement, but as an act of faith and with loving hearts, to learn and discover, as the disciples did, the greater and more vast vision God has for our mission and ministry awaiting when we cross over the lines.

The interim season is not just a place holder until we find a new pastor. It is truly an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to grow us into an even greater expression of God's love, of Christ's mercy and compassion, in this community and the world.

It is our time to be bold to ask and willing to learn for the sake of Tab's future, for the sake of our place in the church universal, and for the sake of our specific role in growing God's kingdom. It is a chance to courageously face our own implicit biases and presumed notions, to notice the lines we've drawn and the expectations we've limited, and to discern the ways God is beckoning us to cross over into even more expansive vision of Greater Faith, Deeper Relationships and Stronger Community.

A vision that reveals Tab as a house of prayer for all peoples...gathered with others, to others and beside others to love and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God – may it be so.