



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Crossing Boundaries

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 16, 2020
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Based on Matthew 15:21-28*

Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think with them; take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

This passage from Matthew describes one of those difficult moments in Jesus' life that we wish had been omitted from the lectionary altogether so we would not have to deal with it. What makes it so difficult is how harsh Jesus sounds. First he refuses to answer a woman pleading for his help, then he denies that he has anything to offer "her kind," and finally he likens her to a dog before the sheer force of her faith changes something in him, and he decides to answer her prayer after all. The problem is that she is a Canaanite. Racial stereotypes, bigotry, and stories of animosity and violence inform all encounters between Israelites and Canaanites. Jesus and the disciples know well not to trespass these cultural presumptions.

In today's story Jesus has just come from Nazareth, his hometown, where friends and family have doubted his authority and taken offense at his teaching. He knows that John the Baptist has been killed, and, at this loss, needs to withdraw from the crowds for a while; but they have followed him, and he has, with five loaves and two fishes, fed them all. Then there was the storm at sea and Peter's wish to cross the water, ruined by fear and doubt. Everywhere Jesus turns he finds need—and people who want what he can do for them, unaware of who he is.

Then comes this Canaanite woman crying out to him to heal her daughter—one more of the needy multitudes who want something from him—only this one does a shocking thing: She calls him by name, "O Lord, Son of David," the title reserved for the Messiah, the title his own people have withheld from him. When this woman addresses him as the Son of David, she names something in him that even his own disciples have failed to recognize, and it must seem like a mean trick of fate to him to hear what he most wants to hear coming from the mouth of someone he least wants to hear it from.

So he does not answer her a word. He draws the line, as surely as if he had leaned down and traced it in the dust at his feet. Enough is enough. He will go no further. So what if she called him by name; he will not waste his energy on this Gentile woman while his own people go wanting. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," he says to the woman, and that is supposed to be that.

But the woman will not stay on her side of the line. Kneeling at his feet, she says, "Lord, help me." She will not be dismissed; she has gotten her foot in the door before Jesus can close it in her face, and she shows no sign of leaving before he has dealt with her. "Lord, help me," she says, and I can only imagine that he is about to combust. Can't she hear? He has told her no, told her that she is not his sheep; but she does not

seem to have gotten the message, so he says it again, louder and clearer than before. Jesus says, “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs,” a cruel rebuff if there ever was one.

It is not hard to imagine how Jesus feels—to be surrounded by suffering and despair; to be confused about what you are supposed to do; to struggle with the awful truth of death-dealing traditions and practices. You have to draw a line somewhere. You have to decide what you can and cannot do. The limitations of time and space, for everyone who walks this planet, mean choosing to leave some things not done. That is a point most of us reach, anyhow, and often we decide to draw the line around our own families and friends, around our own churches and communities and concerns. We draw the line and, like Jesus, we may lose our tempers when outsiders try to cross it, because they are challenging the limits we have placed on ourselves to protect ourselves.

But the Canaanite woman simply will not budge. “Yes, Lord,” she says when he calls her a dog, “yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” When she says that, something in Jesus snaps. His anger dissolves. Something in him is rearranged and changed forever, a change you can hear in his voice. “O woman, great is your faith,” he says to her. “Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter is healed instantly.

The line he had drawn between him and the woman disappears; the limits he had placed on himself vanish, and you can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is and what he has been called to do. He is no longer a Messiah called only to the lost sheep of Israel, but God’s chosen redeemer of the whole world, Jews and Gentiles alike, beginning with this Canaanite woman.

Through *her* faith he learns that God’s purpose for him is bigger than he had imagined, and in that moment there is no going back to the limits he observed even a moment ago. The old boundaries will not contain his new vision; he must rub them out and draw them bigger, to include this woman today and who knows tomorrow. It looks like answering God’s call means that he can no longer control his ministry or narrow his mission. There is no more safety or certainty for him, no more guarding against loss or hanging on to cherished notions about the way things ought to be. Faith works like a lever on him, opening his arms wider and wider until there is room for the whole world in them, until he allows them to be *nailed* open on the cross.

Isn’t that the way it goes? Over and over, God’s call to us means pushing old boundaries, embracing new perspectives, giving up old notions about who and what really matter. We may resist; we may even lose our tempers, but the call of God is insistent, as insistent as the Canaanite woman who would not leave Jesus alone. The call of God keeps after us, calling us by name, until finally we step over the lines we have drawn for ourselves and discover a whole new world on the other side.

For me, there is no call of God more insistent at this moment than the call to dismantle systemic racism. I am all too aware that one of the unspoken privileges of being white in America is the privilege to assume that racism is not a pressing topic. To many white people, it makes little sense to expend energy engaging something largely remote from their daily experience. Race is what other people have, and racism is what other people are responsible for. Moreover, there are plenty of equally pressing matters. There is only so much a person can do. The line is drawn.

Then a death like George Floyd’s occurs and millions take to the streets, pressing up against resistance, speaking up and out, refusing to accept norms as normative. Silence is no longer an option. Suddenly white innocence gets exposed, uncomfortable conversations about white privilege tumble into the open, guilt ratchets up, defensiveness shifts into high gear. Plenty of folks take umbrage at that label because it feels to them like an accusation of personal racism, a threat to their way of life, an indictment of their niceness. To many, the word “privilege” connotes visible perks or benefits usually associated with class or

wealth. What we don't see is a racialized society where privilege is essentially an exemption from the host of weighty burdens that afflict black people every day. If you're white, you don't have to deal with negative assumptions being made about you and death-dealing behaviors being imposed upon you based on the color of your skin. If you're black, you deal with it every day. As someone put it: white privilege doesn't mean your life isn't hard. It just means the color of your skin isn't one of the things that makes it harder.

Our faith reminds us that we have some tools to put to work in our world of racial inequity. We can start by letting go of the defensiveness. It is a constrictive survival response that only separates us from God. We may equate letting go of something, including cherished assumptions, with deprivation; but claw marks do not set you free. According to Jesus, relinquishment is a ticket to abundant life. Reexamining personal behaviors and perspectives is not just a Lenten project. We can no longer live racially unaware lives. We are called to repent of our complicity in and indifference to the toxic legacy of slavery and the private attitudes and public policies that to this day compound the profound damage of the evil of systemic racism. Where we feel uncomfortable, disempower it, and let go of brittleness. The good Lord helps us know that we do not have to secure ourselves against insecurity.

The call of God is indeed insistent, and whenever we limit who we will be to other people or who we will let them be for us, God gets to work, rubbing out the lines we have drawn around ourselves and calling us into the limitless country of divine love. We may well formulate new limits and draw new lines, but none of them last very long, because that is the way it is when people have been called out by God. Once God has called us out there is no going back—whatever we choose to do. God never calls us back behind our lines.

So lean into the power of faith. Do some soul searching. Take what scares the hell out of you about yourself and pick it up, much like that cross Jesus mentions. Then, move your ego aside, much like that denying of self that Jesus commands. And live—with the mind of Jesus, humbly open to changing all that needs to be changed about you and your world. And if you get scared, which you will, and if you get mad, which you probably will too, remember today's story. With Jesus as our pattern—and our Redeemer—we are called to step over the lines we have drawn for ourselves, because we know that it is God's own self who waits for us on the other side.

AMEN.

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