

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, AUGUST 16, 2020

First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

TWENTIETH SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: O sing to the Lord a new song.

All: **For God's steadfast love endures forever.**

One: From dawn to dawn sing praises to the Lord.

All: **For the grace of God is from everlasting to everlasting.**

***OPENING HYMN** "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy" GtG 435

1. **There's a wideness in God's mercy,
like the wideness of the sea.
There's a kindness in God's justice,
which is more than liberty.
There is no place where earth's sorrows
are more felt than up in heaven.
There is no place where earth's failings
have such kindly judgment given.**

2. **For the love of God is broader
than the measures of the mind.
And the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful,
we would gladly trust God's Word,
and our lives reflect thanksgiving
for the goodness of our Lord.**

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***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

Gracious Lord, we come before you humbly, for we know we do not deserve your mercy. We have sought justice for ourselves but neglected justice for others. We have insisted on our rights but have not lived rightly in our relationships. We

have desired mercy for our sins, but we have not offered mercy to those who have sinned against us. Out of your bountiful mercy, forgive us, gracious Lord. Return our hearts to you, and help us to love as you have loved us that our lives may testify to your abounding grace through Jesus Christ. Amen.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON** (from Psalm 103)

One: The love of God is from forever to always, sure and never-failing.

All: **“The Lord is merciful and loving, slow to become angry and full of constant love.”**

One: “As high as the sky is above the earth, so great is God’s love for those who have reverence for God.”

All: **“As far as the east is from the west, so far does God remove our sins from us.”**

One: So rejoice and sing of God’s love and glory!

All: **For in Jesus Christ we are forgiven!**

***THE PEACE**

One: The peace of Christ be with you.

All: **And also with you.**

(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 15:21-28

MATTHEW 15:21-28 (Common English Bible)

²¹ From there, Jesus went to the regions of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman from those territories came out and shouted, “Show me mercy, Son of David. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.” ²³ But he didn’t respond to her at all.

His disciples came and urged him, “Send her away; she keeps shouting out after us.”

²⁴ Jesus replied, “I’ve been sent only to the lost sheep, the people of Israel.”

²⁵ But she knelt before him and said, “Lord, help me.”

²⁶ He replied, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and toss it to dogs.”

²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord. But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off their masters’ table.”

²⁸ Jesus answered, “Woman, you have great faith. It will be just as you wish.” And right then her daughter was healed.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “Out of Bounds?” by Pastor Bill Vincent

Boundaries are important ... except when they're not.

During a football game, the halfback is running down the sidelines when he hears the whistle from the referee blowing the play dead: he stepped out of bounds.

Boundaries are important: they can clarify life; offer guidance, and structure.

A few plays later (in the same football game), there's an injured player on the sidelines. A player from the opposing team comes over to wish him well when one of the injured player's teammates takes offense, and a shoving match ensues. Where's the boundary now? And who's out of bounds?

Boundaries are important ... though sometimes unclear.

Did Derek Chauvin step over the line when he knelt with his knee on George Floyd's neck for some 8 minutes? Are some of the protesters stepping over the line with the looting of stores and the throwing of Molotov cocktails?

We don't like boundaries when they shut us out, when they stand in our way, when they deprive us of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

But we do like boundaries when they protect us, like warning a child not to play in the street. We like boundaries when they keep us safe, when they ward off that which is dangerous ... or that which we have come to believe is dangerous ... like ‘those’ people, like people different from us, or....

Boundaries are important. Structure is important.

Without structure, without appropriate boundaries, you and I would cease to exist. A cell that has no boundaries is just a blob that eventually fades away into the surrounding environment.

But who draws the boundaries? And how?

Who draws the line? And where?

And is part of our growth, part of our spiritual work (and it *is* work) the discernment of ‘who’, and ‘how’, and ‘where’?

And the ‘who’ is not you. But God.

And the ‘how’ is with grace. Not disgrace.

And the ‘where’ will surprise you. More often than not.

Where are the boundaries in our story?

And who is out of bounds?

Jesus is. He, and the disciples, are in a place that is, quite honestly, off limits to good Jews, to good Jewish men.

The woman is out of bounds. She knows she should stay in her place. She should not be addressing a man in public. She should not be talking to a Jew. But she is. And she does.

“I’ve been sent only to the lost sheep, the people of Israel.” Was Jesus out of bounds when he made this reply?

Was Jesus testing the woman?

Or was Jesus himself being tested?

I know, we have difficulty thinking of Jesus in that way, as someone who learned or needed to learn.

Yet we also have difficulty with his response.

His response is hard to explain. But as someone reminds us, **“taking scripture seriously means refusing to explain it away...as if Jesus needs us to protect him from the judgment of others.”** (*Lectionary Homiletics*, Aug.-Sept.2014, pp.20&22)

Was Jesus being tested?

Was the woman being tested?

Regardless of how you answer those questions, note this: mercy wins out. Mercy stretches the line, pushes the boundaries. Mercy is willing to step out of bounds beyond human convention to meet human need.

Are we?

In John Drinkwater’s play, *Abraham Lincoln*, a dialogue occurs between the President and a woman passionate for the northern cause in the Civil War. She asks the President for news of the war, and he replies, “There is news of a victory. They lost 2,700 men and we lost 800.” The woman was ecstatic, “How splendid.” The President was obviously disturbed by her reaction. “Thirty-five hundred lives were lost.” But the woman interrupts, “Oh, you must not talk like that, Mr. President. There were only 800 that mattered.” Lincoln’s shoulders drooped. Tears were in his eyes. “Madam, the world is larger than your heart.” (John Drinkwater, *Abraham Lincoln: A Play* (2008); found in *Lectionary Homiletics*, p.22)

How often do we draw lines where God does not?

Dawn Mayes reminds us, **“God’s love cannot be contained by human boundaries.”** (*Lectionary Homiletics*, p.21)

Even the boundaries of the church.

The story preceding our passage for this morning has Jesus dealing with the “tradition of the elders”: rules and regulations established by the religious authorities over what was considered ‘clean’ (and therefore permissible) and what was considered ‘unclean’ (and therefore not permissible).

We tend to do the same. We draw lines, we establish boundaries, trying to make life nice and neat and clean. We try to protect ‘what’s mine’; we try to protect God (it seems), trying to protect God’s reputation, trying to protect God’s grace -- or are we hoarding God’s grace?

Or worse yet, in drawing our line to protect grace, are we actually shutting it out?

In the last book of C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia (The Last Battle)* there is a group of dwarves that has, in essence, made it through to "the other side" of death -- to heaven, if you will...sort of. But, they are so convinced that what is being told them by others -- about Aslan (the Christ-figure) and life and new life -- so convinced that what they are being told is a lie, that they 'circle the wagons' and turn in upon themselves. They sit in a circle to help each other. They establish their boundary. They draw the line. And they cannot -- literally cannot -- see what is beyond themselves. Though others around them can see the light and the beautiful day that has dawned, these few have shut themselves out, even as they thought they were shutting others out. And all they know is darkness: they are blind. And they cannot even hear aright.

In drawing a line to protect themselves -- to protect their way of life, to protect their 'god' -- they have closed themselves off from life, from others, and from themselves, and from God.

But "God's love cannot be contained by human boundaries."

And in spite of our desire to create so many boundaries and to have things so nice and neat and clear-cut, the news that 'God's love cannot be contained by human boundaries' is good news.

The Canaanite woman comes to know it, and her daughter is healed.

Cornelius and Peter come to know it. You may remember the story (Acts 10 & 11). Peter receives an invitation from Cornelius, a Roman soldier and a Gentile. Peter should never have associated with Cornelius. But God speaks to Peter in a dream, and Peter is convinced that "*God shows no partiality.*" So Peter enters Cornelius' house. And Cornelius is blessed. And so, too, is Peter.

And the church begins to embrace the Gentile mission: comes to know the truth, and go on to show it, that God's love cannot be contained by human boundaries.

And God's love has been breaking through human boundaries ever since -- and still does, even now.

And that is good news.

And that is personal news, for us.

For this breaking through human boundaries actually embraces us. For we are (most of us) Gentiles: i.e., non-Jews, people outside the bounds of the covenant promise. And if it were not for this Canaanite woman (a non-Jew), if it were not for Cornelius and Peter's willingness to cross the threshold, if it were not for Paul and the early church in embracing the Gentile mission (in other words, the mission to *all* people), you and I wouldn't be here.

Someone crossed a boundary for us that we might be touched by mercy, that our nascent faith might be encouraged, that we might be embraced in the realm of God's grace.

So, if that's true for us -- and it is -- what lines do we need to cross, what boundaries do we need to push, what line will we step over ... all because this Canaanite woman -- and Jesus -- stepped out of bounds?

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

In life and in death we belong to God.

**Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.**

**Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:
preaching good news to the poor
and release to the captives,
teaching by word and deed
and blessing the children,
healing the sick
and binding up the brokenhearted,
eating with outcasts,
forgiving sinners,
and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.**

**In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.**

**In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"**

(from A Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pastor: Loving God,...

People: ...hear our prayer.

THE LORD'S PRAYER *(Traditional)*

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.**

**For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**From your abundant grace, O Lord, we bring these gifts. Responding
to your tender mercy, we offer ourselves. Use us, and these offerings, to
share your love and your grace with the world. In Christ's name we pray.
Amen.**

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** "Help Us Accept Each Other" GtG 754

- 1. Help us accept each other
as Christ accepted us;
teach us as sister, brother,
each person to embrace.
Be present, Lord, among us
and bring us to believe
we are ourselves accepted,
and meant to love and live.**
- 2. Teach us, O Lord, your lessons,
as in our daily life
we struggle to be human
and search for hope and faith.**

**Teach us to care for people,
for all, not just for some,
to love them as we find them,
or as they may become.**

**3. Let Your acceptance change us,
so that we may be moved
in living situations
to do the truth in love;
to practice your acceptance
until we know by heart
the table of forgiveness,
and laughter's healing art.**

**4. Lord, for today's encounters
with all who are in need,
who hunger for acceptance,
for justice and for bread,
we need new eyes for seeing,
new hands for holding on:
renew us with your Spirit;
Lord, free us; make us one!**

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Pastor: ...And let the gathered people of God say...

People: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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