



SERMONS THAT WORK

Proper 15 (A)

Borderlands

[RCL] Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

In our Gospel lesson for today, we have one of the most amazing stories in all of the New Testament. It is the profound and troubling and ultimately transformative story of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman. It is also a story that is situated, in almost every way, in the borderland: on the boundary between Jew and Gentile, between friend and enemy, between the sacred and the profane. It is a story of pain and power and prayer, and, ultimately, of blessing. It's not just a nice little story about Jesus granting the request of a Gentile woman. Rather, at its deepest level, it is a complex and fearful story about Jesus' sense of identity and mission being transformed, and about the boundaries separating Jew from Gentile, friend from enemy, and male from female being transgressed. Sorry. No stories about sweet Jesus meek and mild today. Only the fearsome blessing of God waiting for us somewhere out there, along the borderlands of our faith.

Here's what happens. Fresh from confrontation with the religious authorities of the day, Jesus travels to the far northwest border of Israel, to the region of the cities of Tyre and Sidon. This is Gentile territory, which means that a Jew like Jesus was approaching enemy territory. And out there in the borderland between Jew and Gentile, between friend and enemy, Jesus is suddenly approached by a local woman. We are told that she was a Canaanite, which means she was not just any old Gentile. Canaanites were old and bitter enemies of Israel. In first-century Palestine, Jesus and this woman are separated by religious boundaries, national boundaries, and gender boundaries.

The first thing that happens is that the woman starts shouting. She shouts, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." Let's take a moment to notice some of the details because the beauty and the power of this story are found in the details. Notice that the Canaanite woman shouts to Jesus. In this shouting, we see the distance between Jesus and the woman symbolized. The boundaries between Jew and Gentile, male and female, friend and enemy separate them, and, perhaps, she feels it is best not to get too close. So, she shouts at him from a safe distance, trying to communicate across all the boundaries that keep them separate.

Notice also that the woman says, "Have mercy on *me*, my daughter is tormented by a demon." She does not say have mercy on my daughter but rather have mercy on *me*. Something is tormenting her daughter, and a mother who sees her daughter suffering, a mother who sees her child dying, is a mother who is suffering and dying herself. The pain and the power in that plea for mercy are almost too much to bear. A mother sees her child suffering and dying, and she cannot bear the pain it is causing her, so she cries out, "Lord, have mercy on *me*

because my daughter is tormented.” Out in the borderlands of our faith, a woman’s child is being tormented and she cries out “Lord, have mercy on *me*.”

And, astonishingly, we are told that Jesus did not answer her, and his silence is deafening. This woman is in desperate need and in her despair, she recognizes Jesus as Lord, and she cries out to him for mercy. And Jesus is silent. And just like that, we are at the mysterious borderland between heaven and earth, between the human and the divine. The Canaanite woman has come smack up against the awesome and fearful silence of God. As the Psalmist puts it, “O my God, I cry in the daytime, but you do not answer.” In the midst of the pain and suffering in our lives, we cry out to the heavens, “Lord, have mercy on me.” And often, we are met with silence. The borderland between heaven and earth, between God and humanity is often experienced as a silent abyss. Out in the borderlands of our faith, we are often met with the fearful silence of God.

The question is: What will we do in the face of the mysterious silence of God? What will the Canaanite woman do in the face of this silence? Will she turn back discouraged and sorrowful? Or will she persist despite the silence of God?

She persists. Notice, the disciples say, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” *She keeps shouting after us.* In the words of Jesus’ hardhearted disciples, we hear of the persistence of the Canaanite woman in spite of the silence of Jesus. She keeps shouting after them. She keeps crying out for mercy in spite of the silence of God. She keeps saying, “Lord, have mercy on me.” When we find ourselves at the end of our rope, at the edges of our faith, we find ourselves still crying out for mercy in spite of the silence of God.

Finally, we hear from Jesus and his words are a refusal of the woman’s request for mercy. He says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” It is a flat refusal. Notice also that it is a restatement of the boundary that exists between Jews and Gentiles. The Canaanite woman, a Gentile, approaches Jesus with faith, and he reminds her of the boundary that exists between them as Jew and Gentile. The Jewish Messiah was sent only to the lost house of Israel. He couldn’t help her even if he wanted to. Case closed.

But is it really closed? Is the boundary really impossible to cross? The Canaanite woman apparently doesn’t think so. So, despite Jesus’ reminder of the boundary that exists between them, she persists. This time she comes close and kneels down before him, as if to physically demonstrate that there doesn’t need to be a boundary separating them. If Jesus will not respond to her shouts from afar, she will come close, scandalously close, she will cross the physical space that separates them, and kneel down before him and plead once more for her stricken daughter, “Lord help me.”

And again, Jesus rebuffs her, this time with a slur. He says, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” It is an ethnic slur that reinforces the boundary between Jew and Gentile. There is no way around it, even though many have tried to soften the words of Jesus. For Jews, dogs were unclean animals, and to refer to Gentiles as dogs was a well-known term of scorn. Out in the borderland, Jesus refers to Gentiles as dogs, and we may find ourselves reeling backward, wanting to retreat to the familiar territory of pious sentimentality. But what will the Canaanite woman do?

Again, she persists, this time taking the insult hurled her way and turning it back upon Jesus. She will not retreat to her own territory; she will not let the barriers keep her away. Her need is too great and her faith is too strong. She says, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” It is a clever bit of middle eastern banter. Take the words of your opponent and throw them right back at him. Out in the borderland, the Canaanite woman takes Jesus’ insult and transforms it into a profound statement about the universal mission of Christ. *Yes, Lord, seek out the lost sheep of Israel; feed the children, by all means. But remember, even the dogs, even the Gentiles, eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.*

And then something clicked. Jesus’ sense of identity and mission was transformed by his encounter with the Canaanite woman. Or maybe it was our limited human perceptions of Jesus’ identity and mission that were transformed. Isaiah says, “And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord... to love the name of the Lord... these will I bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house... for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” In Jesus’ encounter with a Gentile woman, we are reminded of the revelation that, because Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, he is called to reach out to the entire world. Whatever it was, something fell into place, and Jesus’ sense of identity and mission was enlarged, and he says, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was made well.

In the messy and conflicted world of first-century Palestine, Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman out on the border between Jewish and Gentile territory. It is a profound story of thresholds being crossed, boundaries being propped up and then being broken down again. It is a troubling and painful story of misunderstanding and insult. But it is also the story of a blessing received through the persistence and faith of a desperate woman. And through her persistence and faith, the walls separating Jew from Gentile, male from female, friend from enemy came tumbling down, and our understanding of Christ’s mission was transformed into a message of hope and salvation for the whole world.

Where are the borderlands of your life and faith? Where have you come up against the painful reality of boundaries separating you from others, from God, even from your own self? Have you felt the pain of misunderstanding and the sting of insult that often accompanies our best efforts to get to know our neighbors? Have you come up against the fearful silence of God in the face of a cry for mercy? Our Gospel lesson for today knows of these situations in all their depth, in all their pain, and in all their confusion. And yet it also knows that when we venture out into the borderland, and when we cross the boundaries that separate us one from another, we will be transformed. It may be messy. We may find ourselves misunderstood and confused and insulted. But in spite of this, there is a promise, a promise that at the borderlands of our faith, we will be transformed, a promise that somehow, as we venture out across those borders, we will find our deepest and truest lives, we will find an enlarged sense of meaning and purpose in our lives, we will find the fearsome blessing of God.

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