

Lectionary 20
Proper 15
Pentecost 9
August 14, 2011

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8
Psalm 67
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32
Matthew 15: [10-20] 21-28
Year A

I.N.I.

Each and every day, enormous amounts of energy are spent on boundary-making. Boundaries are good. There are your ordinary, everyday boundaries. If you cross the double yellow line on the road, then you are in danger of a head-on collision with opposing traffic. Then there is that marker you put on the conveyer belt at the check out counter, dividing your stuff from the person in front of you, so as not to threaten the shopper, while the cashier might accidentally swipe your bread before it can be stopped.

There are also the boundaries of propriety, which celebrities like Lady Gaga are pushing. And there are boundaries of identity, where you fill out your ethnicity on a census form, you have a country of origin on your passport, and to someone asking you what is your religious affiliation you might say Lutheran.

Boundaries contain things, mark off what's in and what's out, and give a sense of what's safe or what is acceptable within certain parameters.

And there is a problem with boundaries, when they are used to devalue and objectify the other. Back where I grew up, there were groups called cliques that served cross-purposes, as they created community and at the same time pigeon-holed people: there were your musical fags, your muscle-bound jocks, nerds, preppies, losers, and brown nosers. People that I admired, upstanding friends and family would tell jokes at best, and and at worst spit vitriol about Polacks, Fairies, Spics, Niggers, and Krauts.

People cling to these boundary makers solely to define an in group against another. We would not be here without them, what with our millennia of wars, and centuries of legislated slavery and segregation. Those on the other side of the boundaries are made into monsters. They don't have the same feelings we do. They are vicious and cold-hearted. They couldn't possibly mourn their dead. They couldn't have the same dreams for love that we do. Which makes it all right to blow them up, or hang a noose around their necks.

It was the same in Jesus' day. The Jewish community was subject to abuse and scorn by the Roman occupation, so to counter the cruelty Jews responded with epithets of their own. Everyone else, outside the boundaries, were called *goyim*, Gentiles, the other.

Non-human, they were. Canaanites and Samaritans were called **dogs**, and women were called female dogs, if you know what I mean.

All that hatred was echoed in today's gospel story, but it came from an unexpected voice, perhaps as startling to our ears as those joke tellers startled me. It came from the Jewish rabbi who taught on his Sermon on the Mount "Do not give the dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you" (Matthew 7:6).

Jesus, crossing over into the *goy* territory of Tyre and Sidon, runs into run of them. She comes to him, a Canaanite woman, crying "Lord, have mercy, David's Son. I love my child, my little daughter, and she is severely tormented by a demon." And there was this silence, this unexplained silence in Jesus' non-answer.

Finally, he has a response: "I was only sent to the lost sheep of Israel." Boundary marked. You cannot cross. You are not one of us.

With the nerve of a mother desperate for her child, the woman pleads "Lord, help me."

And then he said it. "It is not fair to take the children's food and feed it to the dogs." It came out. She was a dog. His food, like bread to the multitudes, was not hers. It was to the lost sheep of Israel, manna in the wilderness, feasting on the holy mountain on the last days. "You are a dog, and this food is not for you."

Without hesitation she got on her knees and crossed the boundary again, this *goy* woman speaking to the Jewish rabbi, giving it back to him, getting his attention, good comeback: "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

What happened to Jesus? Did his heart get captured by this woman's tenacity, or by her humanness, or by her becoming a sheep, beloved of God?

Jesus did not say "good one!" He said that her faith was great. Matthew says her daughter was healed instantly.

The Canaanite woman disappears from the scene. We never hear from her again. But the teacher it seems was never the same. From this time forward, he was determined to cross the boundaries, and expand the boundaries. Jesus was set to redefine the welcome of God, at all costs, and began the path to Jerusalem where his own fate was subject to cruelty and shame. I'll bet dollars to doughnuts that his life and his death was not only for Israel, but also broke open God's mercy to this Canaanite woman, and to the *goyim* that he spoke of after he was raised, when he sent his disciples to make disciples of all nations. The *goy*. The Gentiles.

And that's where we are today, all of us Gentiles, Oles or Lenas, Gretas and Hanses, however we are identified or identify ourselves, included in this story and under the

vastness of God's mercy, sharing the bread of salvation on the holy mountain on this day, and in the days to come.

Matthew's community was embroiled in boundary-making to exclude Gentiles, those whose violence toppled Jerusalem and exiled the chosen ones. In the gospel, in stories like these, hearers were caught like Jesus exposed to the vulnerability of the Canaanite woman, and whose hearts were turned to the pain of exclusion. Rather than dogs, the community of Jesus found in that pain humans like themselves, and in that discovery, found their true selves, as Jesus did.

I remember getting distracted as a parent when my very young children wanted my attention. I would be engaged in reading, or a crossword puzzle, or sermon contemplation. Gabriel would be calling out to me, sitting on the same couch, and I didn't pick up on his cries. Finally the kid could grab my two cheeks with his little hands, and physically turn my head to face his. No longer a boundary between us, but I was forced to see him in his need and to address his pain, his request, or his story.

In the midst of all our energy toward boundary-making, consider your cheeks grabbed by the pleas of the suffering ones, that you might die to your presuppositions and rise to the life of expansive mercy given to slaves in Egypt, exiles in Babylon, and the tortured cries of those oppressed everywhere, in Syria, Somalia, Libya, and New Haven.

God will break open something new for us who are brought to attention by the voices of dogs that speak faithfully. Bread, even in little bits, is there for the sharing. A cup of wine will be the lifeblood and the lifeline of the compassionate one, who risks love for those who cry out, in Tyre and Sidon, and here at Bethesda.

Mercy.

I.N.I.