

Sermon for August 16, 2020
 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
 Sermon Texts: Genesis 45: 1-15 and Matthew 15: 21-28
 Sermon Title: “*Drawing the Line*”

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: Eternal God, we often forget the unconditional love you have for all your children. When hatred and anger separate us, your love binds us together. Christ’s love shows the way to reconciliation. The Spirit’s presence ceases our pain. We come now to worship the God who makes us one. Amen.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION: Holy Spirit, come. Search us deeply, open our hearts to what you have to say to us today, cleanse us of all dubious devotions. Give us the humility to enter the Kingdom of God, which has drawn near. Amen.

When the Corona Virus slipped onto our radar screen at the beginning of March, we were told to wear masks, wash our hands frequently under hot water *twice* to the tune of Happy Birthday, to use lots of hand sanitizer with the proper amount of alcohol content, and to wear rubber gloves. The problem is that the lines we drew for safety keep changing. Now it seems as if social distancing and masks will do the trick. At one time nursing homes did not allow even family members to visit. Now it seems that the lack of social contact with family has severe emotional consequences for the residents. Now some nursing homes are allowing visits with family outside at a safe distance. The lines we draw keep changing.....

Jesus has drawn a line with Canaanite woman. This is a story about Jesus that is hard to get your head around because Jesus seems so harsh, so insensitive.....so mean. At first, Jesus doesn’t answer her at all. Then, at the urging of his disciples, he says “*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*” Jesus is drawing some lines here and he isn’t about to cross them. In fact, Jesus is so rude that he calls her a dog – “*It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.*” This isn’t a warm, fuzzy picture of our Lord, especially when you come to realize that the woman from the coastal region of Syria is a gentile, like you and me. She comes from a land that worships strange gods and which has no ritual laws of cleanliness. She is an outsider and unclean. Jesus doesn’t understand his mission to include her.

Now, I suppose we have to appreciate that Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine, and that the Canaanite woman catches him on a day when he’s a little overwhelmed. He has just come from his own home town where his family and friends have been offended by his teaching, he has received word that his cousin John the Baptist lost his head to a dancing girl, he has just hosted a dinner for more than five thousand people with five loaves and two fishes, and he has just walked on water and dealt with Peter’s fear and doubt. It’s been a tough week. He’s all but used up, and then here comes this woman, this outsider, wanting something more from Jesus, more than he feels able or willing to give.

Perhaps Jesus felt that everyone wanted something from him, healing and feeding and all the other miracles, but they didn't want him – that is they didn't want him for who he was to them – the Messiah. Sure, his own people want what Jesus can do for them, but are not much interested in who Jesus really is.

Here's what's really interesting about this encounter. The woman won't give up. Jesus may have drawn a line in the sand, but she has every intention of crossing it. She's a clever one, too. First, she addresses Jesus by the title reserved for the Messiah, a title that his own people have withheld from him. "*O Lord, Son of David,*" she cries out. How ironic that Jesus heard from her lips what he most wanted to hear from his own people. Then the Canaanite woman comes back immediately from Jesus' rebuke of her. She is giving as good as she got. "*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.*" Have you ever had one of those moments when something becomes crystal clear? When you understand something in an entirely new way?

I think Jesus had one of these clarifying moments. Here is this woman toe to toe, eye to eye, with Jesus. Something in him breaks loose and he sees, not only this woman, but also himself in an entirely new way. Jesus has warned the disciples earlier in Matthew that they are to stay away from the Gentiles, that they have been sent to call only the lost sheep of Israel. The main problem has been that the lost sheep don't seem to know that they are lost and don't want to be found. The Canaanite woman gives Jesus a deeper understanding of who his is and what his mission is to be. He is God's chosen savior for the entire world, not just the Jews, and his redemption of all creation starts with this Canaanite woman. You can hear the change in his voice when Jesus replies: "*Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.*" And the woman's daughter is healed instantly.

The old boundaries will not contain this new vision. Jesus must open his arms wider and wider until they contain the whole world. He must erase all lines and draw bigger and bigger circles until they contain all creation. That's what God's call upon our lives looks like. We have all drawn lines. We won't let someone, or some race, or some ethnic group, or some lifestyle choice cross those lines into our hearts. Scientists have a name for our tendency to see only what we have experienced before; they call it "operational blindness." God's call to us means stretching those boundaries, crossing those lines, overcoming our operational blindness until we see that God's face shows up in places that we would never think of looking: in a Canaanite woman's face, in the face of a person with AIDS, in the face of the homeless man on the downtown mall in Charlottesville.

Matthew's gospel reflects a world in which boundaries are shifting; people were afraid. Yet, God's plan was to cast the net of grace to a larger world and people than even Jesus imagined. In the 21st century, boundaries are changing quickly too; people are afraid. Yet, God's plan is still the same – to cast wide the net of grace. As Christians, we are called to take risks, to step out in faith in ways that we never imagined. Our challenge is to overcome our operational blindness, to be agents of God's grace.

Where does one start? I'm trying to pay attention to those times when I can feel my heart shrinking, when I stop listening to the sad story of the woman I met at Southern States, who had her whippets taken away from her, when I fail to meet someone's eyes or return their smile, when I cut short a conversation because I have a busy schedule. And when I feel overwhelmed, tired, or angry when someone has a need and asks for help, and it isn't convenient for me, I will think of this story. I will remember God's constancy and remember that God depends on you and on me to carry God's love and gifts across all boundaries into all the world. Amen.