

2/27/22 WORSHIP SERVICE

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR CALEB

God our Maker,

We rest in the thought of your wonder and your all-encompassing love.

We see your name painted in the wonders of this world you have made and in the incredible diversity and wildness of its creatures.

We struggle to see your dream of a redeemed people – people formed in your image and likeness, yet richly diverse. People transformed from enslavement to false ways of being and instead finding freedom and new life in Jesus who died and was raised. People stumbling steadily along the path that Christ cleared for us toward reconciliation and true peace.

You do not give up on us. You are not far from us. You continue to call us by name.

You continue to whisper the truth of who you made us to be into our ears, against the lies that keep us in bondage to fear and self-doubt. Your presence and your renewing power are here and we don't have to be afraid.

Help us believe to you are at work and that we are a part of your work. You are at work both in us and in our broken world, calling all things to your vision of wholeness.

We give you thanks for each person here, for those listening on Zoom, and for everyone connected in different ways to our congregation.

We give thanks for Dwight Flaming's safe travels and the service he was able to be part of in McAllen, TX with MDS this past week. We pray for communities still impacted by flooding from several years ago.

We pray for migrants dealing with a host of factors compelling them to migrate into our country. Acknowledging much complexity and brokenness in our immigration system, we pray for those seeking a better life to find hospitality, to find faith and hope, and to find wisdom in their difficult choices for themselves and their families.

Closer to home, we lift up those in our congregation with ongoing medical concerns. We pray for those receiving cancer treatments or ongoing treatment for chronic problems.

We pray for members of our community and loved ones who simply live with medical vulnerability and uncertainty, waiting for what the next test might reveal. May they feel connected and a place of safety.

We pray for students with the many activities that occupy time, whether end-of-season games, whether music like the KMEA concert, or school projects. May each one know your presence in the midst of a busy schedule.

UKRAINE

In this moment of war in Ukraine, we pray for this land, knowing many of us had ancestors who lived in this land. We pray for families lacking fuel, food, and basic supplies. For people unable to flee due to roads that are closed. For people in danger of bombs or shelling.

We pray for guns and bombs to fall silent. We pray for those seeking refuge in other countries. We pray for relief from fear and anxiety.

We pray for a future in which these two nations find peace and an avenue toward reconciliation. We pray for the witness of Christians in both countries to discover and witness to the hope and peace through faith in Jesus.

We pray for courage and wisdom for ourselves to be peacemakers in our own lives, in our primary relationships. We pray for a different imagination that resists the myth of redemptive violence or the methods of power over others and domination.

God, we know that history is full of examples of violence and one nation attempting to dominate another. But we know that you have always been at work to show us another way.

We claim the promise of the prophet Isaiah:

“For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born to us...and he is named...Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:5-6).

We pray together in the words that Jesus taught his disciples:

Our Father, who art in heaven...

SERMON – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Matthew 15:1-28

Jesus’ boundary-busting love

As we wrap up our February series on love this morning, I’d like to unpack the two stories that Judy read for us. First, I’ll talk a little bit about the Canaanite woman and then the exchange with the Pharisees and scribes and then...we can wonder a little bit together about how these stories speak to us, here at Alexanderwohl. And what can we learn from these stories about our own mandate to show Christ-like, boundary-crossing love? As I’m talking, maybe you can be formulating some observations, reflections or questions. Feel free to look at the questions that are in the bulletin, but also feel free to come up with your own! And, one small change – we’ll sing the hymn of response immediately following the sermon and *then* we’ll have a time for sharing.

When my oldest daughter was 3 years old we moved from Camp Friedenswald where we had lived in the woods, far removed from traffic and streets, to Wichita where the front door of our house was just yards from a residential street. I had explained streets and fast-moving cars to her and forbidden her from stepping off the yard, into the street, explaining that she could get hurt very badly. Later, as I watched from the door, she tested my explanations and gently but

purposefully put one foot from the curb down, onto the street. I, equally purposefully, walked across the small yard took her by the arm and swatted her backside – a disciplinary tactic I had, until this point, firmly decided against. With big and tearful eyes, she said, “Mommy! You HIT me!” With big, tearful eyes I replied, “Yes, I did, Hillary. I need you to remember this. Streets are very dangerous. You may not go onto the street.” She never forgot that incident and I never spanked again. But in that moment, my deep concern and love for her did not seem to her to be very loving. Sometimes, as we read the gospels, it seems like the ways Jesus showed love, didn’t always feel very loving – to some.

For instance, this woman. This Canaanite or, as the writer of Mark describes her, Syrophenician woman. If it’s interesting to you, you could keep your finger both at Matthew 15 and also turn to Mark 7. Both gospels tell these stories, nearly identically, with just a few differences. Not significant enough to change the impact or meaning of the stories, it’s just interesting to notice.

Mark’s term, Syrophenician is actually more accurate in terms of describing the woman’s nationality and Tyre was the region where she lived – northwest of Galilee. Those of you in the mid-week Bible study might remember from the book of Joshua, the “Canaanites” were people native to Palestine and those that the God of Israel had ordered the Israelites to exterminate. So Matthew, the most Jewish of the gospel writers wants his readers to remember this ancient term and the history of this despised people group. But both terms indicate clearly that the woman was Gentile, pagan, non-Jewish, a member of “the enemy” tribe. After the intense conflict that Jesus had had with the Pharisees just before, he had withdrawn to this specifically non-Jewish region to take a break. But that was not to be.

Matthew tells us that the woman came out shouting – he portrays her in a little more assertive light than Mark. Mark simply says she came and bowed down at his feet. But in Matthew’s telling, this Gentile woman was shouting and she was using the language of a believer’s confession. “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David. My daughter is tormented by a demon.” She acknowledged Jesus as Lord, as the Son of David, as if she understood and embraced the power in those titles and in those words. She believed that he could heal her daughter. Jesus ignored her – he did not answer her at all. And the disciples were annoyed by her and wanted him to send her away.

But she kept shouting. When Jesus finally did respond, he used her language – the language of liturgy and worship, basically telling her that his mission was specifically for the Jewish people. But she would not give up. She came and knelt before him, taking a position of worship and again, she clearly and fervently made her case, “Lord, help me.” Continuing in this vein of religious, rhetorical banter, Jesus gave her one last retort saying, “It’s not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”... the “children” meaning, Jewish people and the “dogs” meaning everyone else – people like her. It was not a complementary comment. Without missing a beat this brave and clearly focused woman responded, “Yes Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs from under the masters’ table.”

This story is astounding. Partly because of the huge boundaries that were crossed, and partly because of the way those boundaries were breached. I would make the case that the Gentile woman was the first to cross the boundaries, she took the initiative to reach out to Jesus, asking for his mercy and his healing power. She was determined, she was prepared, she was undeterred and unflappable. In the face of a well-known Jewish rabbi and his disciples – all of whom were men with much more power than she, a Gentile woman. In the face of generations of prejudice and hatred, baked into the history of her people and their people. In the face of receiving insulting retorts – which she must have anticipated – she persisted. It’s an amazing example of non-violent resistance. And Jesus recognized it. He conceded. He was willing to reach back to this woman, across the boundaries, to acknowledge publically, that she was worthy, she was a child of God, a person of deep faith, an equal member of God’s kingdom. And he extended his mercy and healing to her and her child.

Now back to the story about the Pharisees and the scribes. In a nutshell, this conflict was not between Jews and Gentiles. This conversation was between Jesus and some of the other Jewish leaders who were trying to accomplish several things at once. And, as is often the case, their motives and their actions were complicated. So first, to give them the benefit of the doubt, we can say that they were probably genuinely trying to maintain their commitment to being a holy, chosen people, a people set apart, trying to keep the laws. We can also say that they had figured out how to make some pretty clever and convenient loopholes in the laws. One of those “loopholes” was to tell their parents that they couldn’t afford to take care of them because they were obligated to give that money to the Temple but in fact, they were keeping that money for themselves – not giving it to the Temple OR using it to care for their elderly parents. While they were busy trying to hang on to their money, thereby breaking the commandment to honor their father and mother, they were also trying to trap Jesus using a slippery misinterpretation of the cleanliness code. Their question about whether Jesus’ disciples washed their hands before they ate had nothing to do with whether their hands were clean in the way we think of hand washing before a meal. They were talking about a ritual cleansing. This was an important part of the Jewish tradition that helped to preserve their habit of slowing down and bringing to mind their gratitude to God for being their provider, something like our tradition of saying a prayer of thanksgiving before we eat.

Now, remember – the Pharisees and scribes were the religious gatekeepers, they were the decision-makers and the power brokers. So when they tried to trip Jesus up on a technicality about ritual cleansing he broke through all sorts of boundaries when he called them out on their own disingenuous practices.

First he named out loud, for all the crowd to hear, their financial shenanigans. And then, he called them hypocrites, he quoted their own scripture against them, and he made it plain that the whole point of the cleanliness rituals was to be attentive to staying focused on God, on maintaining a pure heart, clean motivations and intentions. Everyone knows that eating with dirty hands has nothing to do with whether you treat your parents with honor or whether you honor God with your financial decisions.

In this story, Jesus crashed through the boundaries of polite silence, identifying the thick and destructive bureaucracy and hypocrisy of the system. He reminded the crowds, the everyday,

faithful people of God's love for them. He reminded them of the importance of their faith traditions and the meaning that those traditions could have for their lives.

Traditions can help us to hear and see and experience God. They can help us to stay focused and grateful, well-intentioned and authentic in our faith. But when our traditions build barriers that separate us from others and from one another, when the traditions themselves become the object of our worship rather of being the things that point us toward the object of our worship, they become boundaries that have to be overcome by love. Fortunately, we have examples in our scriptures of Jesus and many others doing just that.

Boundary-crossing love can sometimes be the most costly, because it's often the most threatening to the people and the systems that are benefitting from the boundaries. Love that crosses boundaries is often driven by a deep sense that things are off-kilter and they need to be set right. It's often risky and sometimes conflictual – risk and conflict, perhaps the two things that most people want to avoid the most strongly. But as Caleb often says, it's complicated! Because who's to say what's motivating the boundary crossing? Is it love? People have a whole variety of ways of expressing and receiving love – what might seem perfectly loving to the person offering the expression might be received as an unsettling threat, like the exchange between me my 3-year old daughter.

So as we read these two stories back-to-back that we find in both Matthew and in Mark, maybe one thing we can take from them is that in order to practice boundary crossing love, we have to stay firmly steeped in our traditions. The ones that teach us to stay focused on God's love, how to pray, how to listen, how to understand and follow the examples of Jesus.