

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 20, 2023
“Broadening the Boundaries” (Matthew 15:21-28)

It seems that when we sit down and turn on the news, we hear reports of so many bad and deplorable things that we’ve become somewhat immune to them. We hear of murders and sex crimes, arson and burglaries, hate crimes and terrorism. Even though such events reflect the direction of our society – and could take place even in our own back yards – we’re not really shocked or disturbed anymore.

Earlier this summer, there was resolution to an 2018 event that shocked and disturbed me, and probably you as well. On October 27 of that year, Robert Gregory Bowers entered the Tree of Life Synagogue near Pittsburgh, which housed three different Jewish congregations. Bowers entered carrying a Colt AR-15 semi-automatic rifle and three Glock .357 semi-automatic pistols, all four of which he fired in a 20-minute shooting spree. Before he was shot by law enforcement and arrested, eleven of the 75 worshippers were killed and another seven injured. Police sources said that, at some point during the attack, he shouted, *All Jews must die!*

What motivated Bowers to carry out such a heinous act of antisemitism? It was hatred, pure and simple; Hatred for a group of people who were different. These people hadn’t done anything to antagonize the shooter. But they were Jewish; they were different. In his twisted mind, that was offense enough. In June of this year, he was found guilty of 63 federal criminal counts and, earlier this month, sentenced to death.

What does this say about our world? What does it say about us? Certainly not that we are all killers or have the desire to exterminate those not like us. But it does say something about our humanity. There are so many people in our world, perhaps even some of us here this morning, who discount others because they are different; many who practice racism, sexism, and discrimination to the point of being exclusive. It may, in some cases, be an unconscious act, but I think most of us know when we’re being exclusive and, sadly, it doesn’t seem to bother us.

Here are some more statistics the FBI released earlier this year regarding hate crimes. There were 8,673 offenses reported for 2021 – an increase of 13% over the previous year. According to other sources, the actual number is probably closer to 11,000 (a 25% increase) when considering that not all police agencies participate, along with incidents that go unreported. According to the FBI, 65% were attributed to racial, ethnic and ancestral biases, 16% due to sexual orientation biases, and 14% to religious biases.

As a nation, it seems that we are quick to compartmentalize people, based on our biases. We lump them into certain categories, impose certain stereotypes, and don’t allow them to cross certain boundaries we have drawn around ourselves. We want to keep them at arm’s length. But in our gospel text for today, Jesus gives us a lesson in broadening those boundaries to include those we might not ordinarily include.

The text is one in which Jesus encounters a Canaanite woman. Now this woman probably would never have sought out Jesus, except for one thing: her love for her daughter who was demon possessed. That love motivates her to cross certain boundaries and seek the help of the Great

Physician, whom she believes can bring relief to her tormented child. She has heard of Jesus and how he has healed others, so she comes seeking his help, knowing that she will have to break through the boundaries the culture has imposed upon her.

The first strike against her is that she is the wrong gender. We know how women were regarded in Biblical times. They were treated as second-class citizens who were to be submissive and keep their place. Never should a woman approach a man. And the disciples' response indicates this, *Send her away for she keep shouting after us*. Gender is the first boundary she has to cross.

The second strike against her is her religion. The Jews had very little to do with the Canaanites – or any other group of people who were not of Jewish heritage. The Jews viewed themselves as *the* chosen people of God and all other ethnic groups were considered heathens who were outside of God's love and concern. They could not see God in relationship with any other people. To touch these *heathens* would make a Jew unclean. So, showing their bias, the disciples want Jesus to send this foreigner away. This Canaanite woman is not one of them and has no right to call out to the Jewish Messiah.

When the woman approaches Jesus, he doesn't respond to her shouts at first. It almost seems that he, himself, is being exclusive. He then makes a statement that defines his ministry. *I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*. In other words, *I wasn't sent to reach the Canaanites. I was sent to reach only the Jews*.

When she falls before him and begs for his help, he continues, *It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs*. It's somewhat disturbing that Jesus uses an analogy that refers to this woman and her people as dogs. But I don't think Jesus is being derogatory. He loves all people, and he loves this woman. So maybe, just maybe – and you may not agree with me on this – that Jesus is still developing his mission, still discerning the shape and scope of his ministry.

Many of us might believe that, from birth, Jesus completely understood his mission and what he was sent to accomplish. However, because Jesus was fully human, perhaps he had to grow to understand his purpose. After all, Luke tells us that Jesus grew in years and increased in wisdom. So, perhaps, up to this point, Jesus may have felt his ministry was just to the Jews: *I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*. That's what the Jews had been taught about the Messiah. But when he encounters this Canaanite woman with her need and her faith in him, he becomes aware that the boundaries of his mission and ministry are to be broadened to include those outside the Jewish faith.

Or maybe Jesus has understood his mission all along and makes the comment about taking the children's bread and tossing it to the dogs for the benefit of his disciples. The Jews – including the disciples – looked at all non-Jewish people as dogs because they were considered dirty and unclean. So, when Jesus aligns himself with Jewish thought and establishes common ground with the disciples, his words do seem a little harsh. But he wants them to see the boundaries the Jews have place around themselves in order to protect their religion from outsiders.

In the same way, Jesus wants us to recognize the boundaries we've placed around ourselves. We, too, are often times exclusive (whether we realize it or not). Our biases and prejudices have been formed and influenced by the family in which we were raised, by the friends we keep, by the community in which we live, by our economic status, and by our religious and political convictions. Jesus wants us, along with the disciples, to recognize how divisive our biases and prejudices can be.

In addition, the Greek word Jesus uses for *dog* refers not to a dirty, mangy dog, but to a dog that is a house pet, an animal that is seen as part of the family. Although we can't see the expression on his face or read his body language, I imagine Jesus saying this with a twinkle in his eye.

The woman immediately catches the nuance. *No, it's not right to take the food from the children's table and throw it to the dogs; but even the dogs are treated to a morsel from the table from time to time. All I'm asking for is a crumb.* This woman, you see, knows her place and accepts it. As a Gentile, she stands at the door of Judaism and becomes a beggar before God asking just for a dog's portion. She knows God owes her nothing, but she is bold and persistent enough to get down on her knees before Jesus and plead her case.

We can all learn something from this woman. We, too, are beggars. God owes us nothing. In and of ourselves, we deserve none of the gifts God gives us. But consider the crumbs falling down on us every day. God blesses us with so much: food and clothing, home and family, education, protection from evil, friends and productive employment. He provides for the needs of our souls: forgiving our sins, washing away the stain of the past, giving his Son as the sacrifice to take away our guilt before God. He invites us to pray and hears our cries for mercy. He speaks his Word to us. He washes us in Baptism and puts his name on us. He invites us to receive him in the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

Again, we don't deserve these gifts, nor can we earn them. Everything depends on the grace of God. And that's what Jesus demonstrates here: *Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.* And Matthew tells us that her daughter was instantly healed.

In this encounter, Jesus breaks through the barriers his society has imposed on others. He breaks through the prejudice, biases, and hatred and reaches out to one who is considered an outsider – even one considered untouchable in Hebrew society. Jesus' action shows that his mission is extended to all people for all time. His message of salvation applies to all.

Two hives of bees once got into a feud on a dairy farm and were stinging each other into extinction. The farmer got in touch with the controller manager of a dairy company, whose job was detecting feed odors in milk. He knew that bees recognize each other by smell. He sprayed both hives with a powder strongly scented with apple blossom. The bees could no longer distinguish friend from enemy, and the war ended.

Wouldn't it be great if we made no distinction between ourselves, seeing one another only as people of God, each of us having been covered by God's grace through the suffering and death of our Lord? Christ has broadened the boundaries to include us all. Why can't we do the same for others?

It was a Sunday morning in 1865 at an Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia. A black man entered the church. When it was time to receive communion, he came forward and knelt at the railing. A stir of resentment ran through the congregation. Then a respected layman walked down the aisle and knelt beside the black man. It was Robert E. Lee. He spoke to the congregation: *All men are brothers in Christ. Have we not all one Father?*

And that's the key. Whether we are rich or poor, black or white or brown, gay or straight, educated or uneducated, we are all members of the family of God. How can we disregard others when God has regarded us as worthy of being his child? Each and every person has gifts to offer and, by excluding others arbitrarily, we may miss out on the blessings they may bring to our lives.

My friends, boundaries can change. Jesus shows us this today. Those who were once considered to be on the outside are now on the inside. No one is outside of God's love. As his disciples, we need to follow Jesus' example. Every day we should work to broaden boundaries to bring all of God's people into Christ's circle of love and grace. Amen.