

THE MESSAGE for Aug 14, 2011
Matthew 15:21-28
Canaanite Woman... Breaking Through Barriers
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Perception matters.

He lay on a sheet of cardboard in a fetal position, wrapped in an old trench coat and a dirty blanket. The empty whiskey bottle lying beside him, and the sound of snoring, convinced people that the bum was sleeping off a late night binge. The problem was, the bum had chosen the steps of the church for a bed that Sunday morning.

The congregation was dressed in their Sunday best, shocked and disgusted by what they saw. They took the long way around him as they walked into church, whispering to one another about the disgrace of it all. Ushers were asked to wake and move the bum, or at least call the police, but they did nothing. To make matters worse, shortly after the service began, the bum stumbled his way into the church and down a side aisle, sitting in an empty pew towards the front by himself. Everyone saw him. No one said a word, but they were all thinking the same thing: "How do we get rid of this nuisance?" After all, this bum didn't belong here. People were so focused on him that no one noticed that the pastor was missing that particular morning.

That all changed when it was time for the sermon. To everyone's horror, the bum got up from his pew and walked to the front of the church, where he took off the hat and wig and the old trench coat. It was then that the congregation realized that the bum had been their pastor, all along. The pastor then read these words from the Bible:

"My brothers and sisters, do you, with your acts of favoritism, really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the Kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court?" (James 2:1-6)

The message the pastor preached that Sunday was one the congregation would remember for a long time to come.

When it comes to deciding who is entitled to God's grace, we have this natural human tendency to be gate keepers. We somehow instinctively know who is entitled and who isn't. And here's the thing – we get it wrong every time. Not one of us is qualified to make that decision. But we do it all the time. Something in us always seems to want

to decide who is worthy of God's grace, and who isn't. That's the issue we find in our Bible reading for today from Matthew.

(Read Matthew 15: 21-28)

Jesus and the disciples have this problem. The problem is a Canaanite woman who comes to Jesus looking for help. She is a problem for at least three reasons.

First reason, she is a she, a woman. Women in the ancient world were seen as second-class citizens at best. They were to be seen, not heard. Appropriate behavior was that a woman should never approach or speak to a man who is not her husband. That is rude and bad manners. And yet here is this woman running up to Jesus, a rabbi, throwing herself at him, and shouting for his help. That's just plain wrong.

Second reason, she is a Canaanite. To the disciples, this stirs up all sorts of deeply-rooted ethnic hatred. A Canaanite is someone who lived in the Promised Land before the Israelites moved into it. The term later came to mean a Gentile, a non-Jewish pagan. Jews and Gentiles despised one another. A devoted Jew would never set foot in the Gentile district of Tyre and Sidon – and yet that is where Jesus and the disciples are. Someplace they didn't belong. (Side note: Jesus is always going where he doesn't belong and his is always taking his disciples where they don't belong.) Now being a woman is bad enough in the disciples' minds. Being a Canaanite woman puts this particular woman into an "unworthy" category all on her own.

Third reason, this woman is an interruption to their agenda. Jesus and the disciples have gone there to get away from the constant harassment from the Pharisees and the demands of ministry. They need a break. The last thing they want is some pagan woman who doesn't know her place asking Jesus for something she doesn't deserve.

Notice how Jesus and the disciples respond to this woman's plea for help. First Jesus ignores her, then shuns her, then tries to offend her. The disciples urge Jesus to just send her away. But this woman, this Canaanite woman, is persistent. Her love for her sick daughter, and her conviction that Jesus can do something about her problem, motivate her to press on. Jesus reminds her that his primary mission is to the Jews, not to Gentiles like her. She is not part of his target audience. She is not part of his tribe. But she continues shouting, "Lord, please, help me."

How Jesus responds is amazing. He says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." In other words, the Jews are worthy of God's grace, but you a pagan, a non-Jew, you are a dog. You are not worthy. Can you see the disciples saying, "Yeah that's right get out of here, woman."?

Even more amazing is how this woman responds. With humor and theological insight, she says, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." She is challenging the notion that God's love and grace are only for a select few, as if some are worthy and some are not. And of course only Jesus has the

authority to decide who is worthy of God's grace and who is not. She apparently knows that. She asks for a mere crumb – a mere crumb of God's grace. I know I'm not worthy. How about just a crumb?

At our house, at our table, our dog is right there, under the table. Anything that falls on the floor is his. He can smell the food in the air and he wants some of it. If a crumb falls on the floor, he will gobble it up. And people food upsets his stomach. He can't have it. The other week we dropped a corn cob and he ran off with it and 'till I got to him he had eaten half of it. That's the image we have of this woman. She is just looking for a crumb from Jesus. That's all she needs. She can smell the goodness and grace of God in Jesus and all she needs is a crumb. You can spare a crumb of grace, surely.

That's faith. She has faith that God's love and grace are not dependent upon our worthiness, but upon God's goodness – period. Such faith moves Jesus deeply. The woman's daughter is healed and her faith is etched in history for all to see.

Can you image how this changed her life forever? She would live that story over and over and over sharing it with anyone who would listen. "My daughter was deathly ill. I went to Jesus. I didn't deserve it but it happened. And his grace was enough. And my daughter is alive and well today because of Jesus." That's her story.

We learn a few lessons from her story.

First, we learn how to approach Jesus in worship. How did you come into worship this morning? Did you come out of duty to put in your hour or so and then go for lunch? Or did you expect to feel the presence and power of God in this place sending you out of here a different person? Perception matters.

This woman comes to worship on her knees in humility and gratitude. It's as if she is saying to Jesus, "Lord I am not worthy to receive you or your grace but only say the word so my daughter will be healed." She knows her place in God's grace. How did you approach worship here this morning?

Second thing we learn from this woman is that no matter how unworthy people think we are or how unworthy we think we are, God's love and grace is ours.

God longs to connect with us – everyone of us. God want to connect with every one of the 6,955,424,624 people in the world right now (as of 6:00 this morning). No matter who you are, no matter where you've been, no matter what you've done or have failed to do, God's love and forgiveness is for you – not because you're good, but because God is. So many people in the church and outside the church seem to struggle with this reality. I'm here to tell you right now, God loves the person sitting in your seat. And don't let anyone convince you otherwise. Believe it!

The third thing we learn from this woman is that we need to break down the barriers that prevent anyone from coming to worship Jesus too.

As a Lutheran tribe of Christians we have this wonderful theology of grace which compels us to share the life-giving message of Christ Jesus by the way we live our lives. The problem is people aren't able to hear this wonderful life-changing message of grace and love for various reasons. That's not a message problem, it a methods problem. And it's our problem in the church. The awesome message of God's love remains the same. How we deliver that message must constantly change because we live in a constantly changing world. I checked the world population right before worship at 9:00 and 23,400 babies were born since 6:00 this morning. The world is changing.

Did you know that the United States is the forth largest mission field in the world for Christianity? I wonder why? We claim to be a Christian nation and yet nearly 55% of the population in the USA never goes to church. That's around 170 million people. I wonder why. It may have something to do with barriers that exist in the church.

I know that is hard to believe but its true. We have barriers in the church that prevent people from growing in God's grace and love. That bothers me... and I want to do something about it.

Check out this video from YouTube and listen to what we found out about ourselves in the church and the perception people outside the church have of us. Warning it may be a truth that's hard to accept. Check it out.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_SBgEW7XT4

Whether it's true or not, perception matters. How we, as Christians, live our lives matters.

After watching that video, it's very tempting to say, "Well the unchurched just don't understand us." or "It's their problem." Maybe, just maybe their perception is right about us. Truth is – the unchurched are hungry and thirsty for a relationship with Jesus and for the most part open to someone like you and me talking with them (not *to* them but *with* them) about Jesus and what difference he makes in our lives.

If the word on the street was that I was Bad Driver, I might take offense to that even if I was a bad driver, which I am not! I really don't want people to think I'm a bad driver so I could respond, "Oh they just don't understand me." or "Oh that's their problem." I could jokingly say, "If they don't like my driving they should stay off the sidewalks." If I wanted to change their perception of my driving, I probably wouldn't take out a newspaper ad or put up a billboard with the message "Rob Miller is a great driver." No. I would change my driving habits.

Maybe we in the church might consider changing our faith habits in light of what the perception people outside the church have of us.

In our story today Jesus changed the disciple's habits of determining who is worthy and who isn't when it comes to God's grace. Jesus decides who's in and who isn't. AND he extends God's grace to the unlikely and the unworthy. Even bums who stumble into worship. We can change our faith habits too for the sake of those outside the church.

Growing up I could not sit still in church. I know that might be hard to believe but it's true. My mother would often say "Robert, people are watching you... and if you don't settle down, I'll smack your bottom right here in front of everyone." So I would respond the only way a 4 or 5 year old could respond. I'd turn my backside and say, "Here, smack it right now." Truth is since I realized that people were watching me, I changed my habits.

Consider this: When you walk out of worship here this morning people will be watching you. I hope and pray they see Jesus in you. I hope and pray they see you doing his work in the world. Jesus came to reconcile the entire world to God – to put all things in a right relationship with God – a relationship tarnished by sin.

Listen to these words from Paul's letter to the Corinthians: May they speak to us here today. *"So from now on, we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us."* (2 Corinthians 5:16-20a)

Brothers and sisters in Christ – perception matters. Amen.