



# Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Lockett Currie

Drawing Larger Circles

Sermon for August 14, 2011

Scripture: Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Psalm 67, Matt. 15:21-28

Am I the only one that finds Jesus' words in today's Gospel reading troubling? It's always been a difficult passage for me. Jesus relates to an outsider, a Canaanite woman, in a rude and demeaning way. First he ignores her, and then makes racist remarks. Next he insults her by referring to her and her people as "dogs", a common derogatory remark for Gentiles or pagans. I do not want to believe that my Jesus, the person I love so much, the person whose teachings and examples are the role model for how I want to be could possibly be so rude and exclusive.

Let's look at some background for the setting of this scripture. We are told that Jesus and his disciples are in the district of Tyre and Sidon, the area of today's Lebanon. This region is Gentile land. Jesus usually stays in the Jewish/Samaritan territory. I wonder why they are there. Could Jesus be wanting to expand the area of his influence and concern? Up until the time of Jesus, the family of God, the chosen people included only the literal descendants of Israel—which would of course exclude most of us.

In the Old Testament reading from Isaiah, there is a different example of God's concern for "the Other". We hear in Isaiah that the foreigners and eunuchs that joined themselves to the Lord, who kept the Sabbath and held fast to God's covenant, would also be brought to the Holy Mountain. Eunuchs were castrated men whom Moses had indicated would be excluded from God's blessings, much in the same way that many of our churches exclude gays, lesbians, and transgender



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persons today. However, in this reading the Lord says he will bring all of these folks into the circle; moreover, he says that the Lord's house will be a house of prayer for all peoples. Likewise in our Psalm there is strong reference to "all the peoples praise you". When the word peoples is plural it refers to different groups of people, often different ethnic groups. So we see that there is a precedent for being more inclusive, drawing larger circles.

Let's now focus on this desperate woman, a mother with a sick daughter. Even though a foreigner, she's heard about Jesus and his healing powers. She was determined, very determined to talk to Jesus. His disciples were just as determined to keep her away from him. She was loud and insistent. She begged him to heal her daughter whom she thinks is tormented by a demon. She kept shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." And Jesus kept silent. The disciples plead with Jesus, "send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." This Canaanite woman isn't going anywhere! Finally Jesus spoke and said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"—A VERY SMALL CIRCLE. Finally she broke through the disciples and knelt before Jesus and said, "Lord, help me." And we know the rest of the story.

At the end of the encounter Jesus says to her, "Woman, great is your faith." As Barbara Lundblad writes, "But she hasn't made any confession of faith. There's no sign she's been born again. She simply spoke the truth." Remember just in the previous chapter of Matthew the children have been fed – 5000 men, besides women and children, with twelve baskets of food left over. Surely there's enough for her and her daughter. "At the end of this chapter there is another feeding story. This time 4000 men are fed -- besides women and children -- and there were seven baskets left over. Seven is the number of wholeness, completeness, a number



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encompassing the nations. Matthew has placed the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman between these two feeding stories. The Canaanite woman taught Jesus that she and her daughter deserve more than crumbs. After this encounter Jesus went on to feed those who had not yet been fed.”<sup>1</sup>

I believe that Jesus was converted that day. It was a profound conversion for the human Jesus, the Jesus that had, as we all have, the influence of culture and history that stereotypes people. Jesus was direct and humble, not worried about saving face, not ashamed to correct himself. He was challenged by this pushy mother—a Canaanite, an outsider, who was worried about her sick daughter. This woman spoke up boldly and kept persevering until Jesus heard her.

Who are the Cannanites among us today? Who do we want to see Jesus send away? Who do many Christians not welcome into their fellowship? Certainly the group that gets the most negative attention in the Christian churches is the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender folks. The United Church of Christ, our national denomination was one of the first denominations that accepted and even ordained openly gay people (Wm. Johnson in 1972.) In the General Synod in 2009, the UCC passed a resolution in favor of marriage between the same genders. I know that there are some of you here today that don't agree with this stand. I'm so glad that you continue to be part of our church family. I believe there is room for many different types of people in our church. You certainly do not have to agree with your pastor, and I always love a chance to talk to you about your beliefs and how you feel about what I say or don't say. I believe that we can learn and grow together. I feel that is an honor to be able to listen to you as well as talk with you about any of these controversial matters.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Kay Lundblad, “Teaching Jesus,” ON Scripture – Sunday, August 14, 2011. Matthew 15:21-28



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In our American society, especially over the last ten years, there is another group that has become the Other and that is the Muslim. Ever since 9/11, the outpouring of suspiciousness and hate keeps growing, not only in this country but across Europe and other places. This past week I saw Mr. El-Gamal, a Brooklyn born Muslim, interviewed about his proposal to build in lower Manhattan a Muslim Community Center, based on the Jewish Community Center on the Upper West side where his daughter learned to swim. It would be open to all, with a pool, a theater and cultural, religious and interfaith programming. And the site, which is already used for Muslim worship, would include a mosque. In 2010 the response to this proposal turned from bad to worse. Amongst the many protestors were those with signs saying, “All I need to know about Islam I learned on 9/11.” I understand that one of the candidates in our presidential primary race has called for a ban on building mosques in the U.S. Will we be like the disciples and drive away Muslims, seeing them as the enemy, the new Canaanites?

In reflecting on today’s scriptures and this sermon, there are several conclusions that I would like to make: The first one is it is okay to change your mind about something; Jesus did it here graciously. New insights can come to any of us. Remember our denominations’ motto: God is Still Speaking, and there is more light and grace to break into our universe. My second conclusion is that members of despised and oppressed groups, as hard as it must be, need to be bold in seeking change. Many times I hear people complain about the GLBT folks always being in our face. Next time you start to feel that way, I would ask you to remember the Canaanite woman with Jesus. If you are part of an oppressed or despised group, I encourage you not to be silent but to speak out boldly for change, gathering



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solidarity from those that wish to support you. And finally, closely connected to the first conclusion, it is possible to be changed, even to be transformed. Jesus seemed to be forever changed by this confrontation; he overcomes ethnic, cultural, political, gender and religious barriers that have been created by human beings—he draws the circles larger. He crosses boundaries until he finally says at the end of his time here on earth, you shall know my followers by their love. It doesn't matter what their race, their background, their nationality or ethnicity, their social class to name a few. What matters is how we love one another! In the end it is that circle of love that needs to be big enough to take everyone in. I'm reminded of Edwin Markham's poem Outwitted:

He drew a circle that shut me out--  
Heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout.  
But Love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took him in!

May we draw ever-larger circles of God's beloved children. May God guide us and bless us. Amen and Amen