

Sermon for August 16, 2020, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Des Moines © Steve Godfrey
Matthew 15:21-28

Do you ever feel excluded or rejected by God? Last week, reflecting on Matthew 14, with the disciples stuck in a boat in a windstorm and Jesus off praying by himself somewhere, I asked if you ever feel like God is very far away, as many of us are experiencing in this year of pandemic struggle. I urged us to follow Peter's example, reach out for God, and listen for Jesus, who is very near to us – on our lips, in our mouths, as St. Paul paraphrases from Deuteronomy in Romans 10. The next day, Monday, we were hit with the most destructive storm in recent Iowa history. Many of us have struggled this past week with power outages to endure and damage to clean up. It sure feels like God is not just far away, but even turning God's back to us! Why are you so angry with us, God? Lord, Have mercy on us!

Faith can feel like a lot of work, especially when things feel especially hard, as has been the case the last several months. We often make it even harder by turning inward, getting selfish and self-righteous, setting up boundaries to try to protect ourselves. The disciples did this when they were surrounded by thousands of hungry people. They urged Jesus to send the people away to find food. Jesus challenged them to be more faithful and showed them how they could feed the crowds with his presence and blessing.

The disciples urge Jesus to send someone away again in today's reading and Matthew even gives us a rare glimpse of Jesus's humanity in the way that he sides with his followers in a posture of scarcity and exclusiveness. This is a very curious passage because of the way that Jesus comes off as such a mean and arrogant man, especially in contrast to the woman begging for healing for her daughter. Where is the Jesus that transcends boundaries and shows us all how to love one another compassionately and abundantly? It's as if he has forgotten of the power of the resurrection to triumph over limits, fear, and exclusion. In this story it is not Jesus who shows how to be faithful, it is the Canaanite woman, who challenges Jesus's boundary in a posture of courageous faith in the abundant power and potential of Jesus's presence.

When studying this passage, we often focus on Jesus's rejection of the woman from another ethnic group and his repentance and reconciliation into right relationship with someone he has wronged. There are important lessons about power dynamics in relationships and just how to be kind and attentive to others, especially those different from us and those who have less power in society. But there is some risk in that focus. As a Jewish man and religious leader, Jesus was in a position of power over the Canaanite woman and should have been sensitive to that. But both were members of ethnic groups oppressed by a colonizing empire. Focusing on ethnic oppression here can lead to anti-Jewish conclusions that we need to be careful to avoid.

What is most important in this passage is the strength and articulation of the woman's faith in the face of the challenges of Jesus and the disciples. It's a story about how faith is such hard work and about how the faith of the church has tackled that challenge. I don't mean to downplay the problem with Jesus's behavior, but rather invite us to focus right now on the woman's persistent and particular faith.

The point of the miracles of feeding thousands and walking on water was to demonstrate the power of the resurrection. The point of this story of the Canaanite woman is to demonstrate that that resurrection power is not just for some people, but for all people. If we feel excluded or rejected by God, it's probably because faith leaders are trying to put God in a box. It's such a pervasive problem that even Jesus succumbed to it!

The woman's faith demonstrates what happens when people believe in God and the power of the resurrection even when people are trying to exclude and subjugate them, even when it seems like God is angry and fed up with us and trying to set boundaries to keep us away. She symbolizes the faith of the early church that believed in Jesus in the face of violent persecution. She is a precursor to the faith of African Americans, whose slavery my white supremacist ancestors defended with Jesus's words, and who believed persistently that the Good News of the resurrection applied to their humanity and freedom as much as anyone.

Jesus's behavior, like the disciples, in this story is not excusable. My exclusionary behavior at times has been inexcusable. They and I are called to repent and open up to the witness of others. This story shows us that ultimately God is with us and loves us. It just takes more work sometimes on our part than it really seems like it should to practice and realize that faith and its product, the experience of resurrection life that transcends evil and death and leads to the eternity of love that is the ultimate realm of God.

How might you learn faithfulness from the Canaanite woman?

How might you pray this week for God's mercy in this challenging time?